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Three-Fingered Jack,

The Road-Agent of the Rookies;

OR,

THE BOY MINER OF WARD LUCK.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A ROAD-AGENT IN SPITE OF HIMSELF.

"HALT, there! Move a finger and I'll fill you so full of holes that your carcass won't hold water!"

The words rung out clear and distinct upon the morning air, rendered doubly significant by the sharp, metallic *click-click*, telling of one or more firearms being prepared for instant use.

The traveler promptly obeyed, in so far that he halted abruptly, the clear, mellow whistle with which he was beguiling his way ceasing as suddenly, while his eyes turned instinctively toward the dense clump of bushes from whence had issued the startling mandate. And, though his bronzed cheek grew a thought paler, his right hand quickly closed upon the revolver butt at his hip.

"None of that—keep your hands free, or there'll be a feast for the black vultures right where you stand now!" sharply added the same voice. "Thank your patron saint that we are feeling in a comfortable humor to-day, else a brace of bullets would have ordered your halt, instead of my sweet voice. You see—we are five to one—and that one a baby."

"Baby or not—give me half a show and I'll fight the lot—but no! you skulk behind cover and shoot down honest men from behind—"

"Don't they grow men bigger than that, where you came from?" and, grinning with the grace of a snarling coyote, the speaker emerged from his covert.

There was a strong contrast between the two, thus confronting each other.

The traveler was a trifle below the medium height of man, and seemed rather "chunky" in build, though that was in part the effect of his heavy, ill-fitting miner's suit of woolen and corduroy. In the chaste language of the P. R., he was one who would "peel well." His face, though bronzed by sun and wind, was tinged with pink and white. This, added to the soft fuzzy down—not unlike that upon a peach—shading his upper lip and along his jaws, gave him a schoolboyish air, not calculated to inspire awe in the breast of a rough "forty-niner," or a knight of the road such as now confronted the lad. But there was an expression around the clear-cut, red lips, a steady glitter in the full blue eye that indicated more than appeared upon the surface.

The laughing outlaw was tall, rising six feet, of a gaunt, bony and angular build, yet apparently active and supple as a mountain lion. A livid scar transversed his face, which had cut into and distorted the vision of one eye. A straggling, wiry black beard and mustache, long locks of greasy hair, a torn and blood-stained suit of Mexican garments, a belt fairly bristling with knives and revolvers, a straight-bladed, two-edged sword hanging naked at his hip, a long "Kentuck rifle" in his hand—such was the "outfit" of the road-agent.

"What do you want with me, anyhow?" sharply demanded the youth, his eyes glowing at the taunt. "If you are a thief, you've struck a blind lead here. I'm 'shoal on the bar'—haven't got dust enough to buy a square meal—"



The stage whirled around upon two wheels, the others whizzed in the air, and all seemed lost.

"We're after bigger game, baby—but you'll do to help pass away the time while waiting. As for gold—I've slit many a man's weasand for love—just to see the red blood gurgle and flow—I love it! It's mother's milk to me—dearer than all the red gold—"

His wolfish face became inflamed, his little eyes glowed and snapped, and one hand clutched nervously at his throat. The young man started, with a little cry.

"Three-Fingered Jack!"

"Ay! Manuel Garcia, or Three-Fingered Jack,

as they call me," said the outlaw, proudly, holding up his mutilated hand. "You have heard of me!"

"I have—and I would give a year of my life to stand face to face with you, equally armed and with none of your cowardly coyotes around to aid you!" cried the miner, with intense bitterness, as he sprung back a pace and half drew a revolver.

But his desperate resolve was promptly frustrated. A pair of sinewy arms were wound around him from behind, and a chuckling out-

law held him helpless, clear of the ground, despite his furious struggles. Then Garcia, laughing ferociously, drew a knife and signed for his comrade to loosen his hold.

"Is it worth while, Jack?" interrupted a third outlaw. "He is not worth the plucking, and there is no honor to be gained by a man's killing a baby in knife-play."

"You are right, Cardoza—and I was a fool for minding his kicks. Bring him under cover, Jim; we will settle what to do with him there."

The captive was borne into the bushes, and there deposited in the center of the ring formed by the five outlaws. If not resigned to his fate, he realized the utter folly of attempting resistance, and quietly submitted. Yet there was no trace of fear to be read in his clear eye, nor upon his boyish face, though the conversation of the quintette was any thing but comforting.

"It's been two days since I had a fresh drink," muttered Three-Fingered Jack, playing thoughtfully with his knife.

"And my bullet-pouch is clean wore out," chimed in Mountain Jim, the renegade Kentuckian. "His hide looks kinder tender, and—think it'll answer, boys?"

"Bah! he laughs at you—see!" interrupted the fourth, a little smoke-dried scoundrel, whose full title would fill a column, but who was known to "the family" as "The Scorchers" from an incident well known in Sonora. "We must put our heads together and devise something extra for this mighty—"

"Drop it all," peremptorily cried Three-Fingers. "We'll have our sport and turn it to profit, as well. As for you, young sir—listen to me."

The mutilated outlaw changed his position to one more easy, and while his keen eyes were peering at the young miner through his shaggy eyebrows, he lazily sliced the earth and moss with his knife.

"I don't know why I don't slit your throat and be done with it—that's more in my line, and mayhap I'll do it yet—I make no promises, unless you choose to take the one chance which I'm going to offer you. I suppose you're what is called *honest*?"

"Suppose what you please—but understand one thing. You learn nothing from me until I see what you are driving at. Play with your cards on the table, and maybe I'll take a hand in."

"Knock the impudent cur in the head!" growled Mountain Jim.

"What's your name?" continued Garcia, without noticing the ruffian.

"Little Volcano," shortly replied the prisoner. "Good enough! Now listen. You have heard of us; you know what we are. Naturally enough we don't like those whom the world calls honest men—they are fools and cowards, every one. They either don't know enough to be road-agents, or else they are afraid of the consequences. You don't seem to be either. You would be an honor to our family—when you grow a little older—"

"Thank you for nothing!" sneered the young miner. "If you hadn't taken such care to tie my hands, I'd give you an answer that you couldn't mistake."

With remarkable forbearance for him, Garcia laughed quietly. He had decided upon his course and was not to be driven from it.

"Don't borrow trouble—we don't pick up recruits for our noble army so carelessly. You couldn't join us if you begged till all was blue, for you're an American and our master hastes them as the devil does holy water. Lucky you fell into my hands instead of his!"

"Yes—report says you are a model of humanity!" and the blue eyes glowed with angry hatred as he recalled the horrible tales told of this blood-stained devil in human shape.

"Let that pass. This is what I mean: I'll give you one chance for life. If you refuse it, say your prayers beforehand. You won't have time after. You understand?"

"Clear as mud! I may understand better when you tell me the rest," coldly replied Little Volcano.

"I said you'd make a good road-agent, with practice. If you make me lie, so much the worse for you. You see yonder trail? It leads to the town of Hard Luck. There are not many travelers along it, except by stage. So much the better for you, since you must stop and go through the first passenger who chances along, or else have your throat slit as you lie."

The four outlaws who had been listening rather impatiently to the somewhat prosy explanation of their comrade, here expressed their delight at the novel entertainment promised them.

"It'll be better'n a dog-fight, won't it?" chuckled Mountain Jim, nudging Cardoza with his elbow.

"Yes—if the pilgrim only shows fight," added that worthy.

"Well, which is it?" demanded Three-Fingered Jack, as he turned toward the prisoner. "The knife or—?"

"Let me think—there's no one in sight yet," muttered Little Volcano, in a low, strained voice.

"You know the consequences. I don't care, myself, how you decide," carelessly added Gar-

cia, as he rolled over, and producing a deck of well-worn cards from his bootleg, the party were soon deeply interested in the beauties of *monte*.

Little Volcano—as he had given his name—watched them moodily enough. It was, to say the least, a disagreeable predicament into which he had fallen. Joaquin Murieta and his gang of cutthroats and footpads were then a power in the land, carrying matters with a high hand, writing their names in letters of blood throughout the Golden State, here to-day, there to-morrow. And of them all, not even Joaquin himself was feared and execrated more than Three-Fingered Jack—the fiend in human guise, who killed for the mere pleasure of slaying—whose victims—among them helpless women and children—could be numbered by the score.

All this the prisoner knew; he knew, too, that Garcia would not hesitate to put his threat into execution at the slightest provocation.

"Say, old man," he called out, sharply. "Supposing there's more than one pilgrim—"

"So much the worse for you. One or twenty, you must halt and go through the next party that comes along yonder trail. If you do it, then you are free to go your way—if not—you understand?"

Little Volcano sunk back and relapsed into moody silence. There was one chance. The trail to Hard Luck was not one noted for its travel. The patience of the outlaws might be exhausted before any "pilgrim" came along.

This hope was crushed almost as soon as conceived. Three-Fingered Jack suddenly dropped his cards and bent his ear attentively, a grim smile curling his heavy lip. Faint and sounding from afar, the listeners could just distinguish a whistle—as though some wayfayer was beguiling his step with a merry tune.

"Your chance is coming, young hill-on-fire," grinned Garcia, turning to Little Volcano. "Will you take it?"

"You know I must," was the sullen reply. "Set me free and give me my weapons."

"So you can use them on us, eh? Well, we'll run the risk. Mind—the first crooked step you take will be your last. You've got to go through that mocking-bird, or we'll put lead enough in your carcass to anchor you in forty fathoms—mind that!"

"If you're afraid, you can hide yourself first, then throw me my tools," sneered the young miner. "Five men afraid of one little boy—and he unarmed and with his hands tied!"

"Crow as loudly in his ear and you'll scare him to death," laughed Garcia, as he released the captive and restored his weapons. "When he gets to yonder rock, show yourself and go through him. If he cuts up rusty, give him a pill. If he is fool enough to make a fuss and rub you out, we'll take care to avenge you—"

"Much good that'll do me! Thank you, for nothing, Three-Fingered Jack. Only—I wish it was you coming along the trail!"

"Thar he comes—only one feller!" muttered Mountain Jim, in a tone of disgust. "An old cripple, too!"

The pilgrim, still whistling merrily, appeared upon the ridge, and Little Volcano cast an anxious glance toward the one whom he was sentenced to rob or lose his own life.

He was tall—would have been remarkably so only for a stoop which amounted to almost deformity. His hair and long beard were of a dingy yellowish white. His clothes would have put any respectable scarecrow to the blush, so dilapidated were they, patched and pieced though they had been with odds and ends until scarce a trace of the original material remained. One shoulder supported an old rusty rifle, with bandaged stock, from the barrel of which dangled a bundle tied up in a piece of sackcloth.

"When he reaches the rock—out you go!" hissed Three-Fingered Jack, holding a cocked revolver where Little Volcano could see it. "And mind—no tricks. The first sign of treachery and you're a dead man!"

"You said that before—do you think I'm a fool?" angrily muttered the boy miner, as he looked to his weapons.

The old man reached the rock indicated.

"Halt there! lift a finger and you're a dead man!"

Little Volcano leaped forward with leveled revolver, uttering this challenge in a clear, sharp voice. The old man paused abruptly, his tall form straightening itself, but then a puzzled look came over his face, as he saw his antagonist.

"Not a word—shell out your dust or you're a dead man!" added Little Volcano, still advancing; then, when almost within arm's length of the traveler, he muttered: "We're watched by a gang of Joaquin's men—play frightened, or we're gone up!"

"Don't—don't p'int that thing this-a-way—s'posin' it'd go off—whar'd I be? Don't shoot—I'll give you all I've got—"

"Hurry up, then—my arm's getting tired—shell out, or I'll blow you to never-come-back—again in less'n no time?" cried Little Volcano, for the benefit of the listening outlaws; adding in a whisper: "Edge toward the bank—do it natural as you can—once there we'll give them the slip yet."

"I will—I will—the dust is in my bundle—don't shoot and I'll git it for you, mister," quavered the miner, as he swung his long rifle around from his shoulder.

The bundle fell from the barrel with such force that it rolled over and over until it paused within half a dozen feet of the steep slope. But so natural was it done that even Little Volcano believed it the result of an accident.

"It's in thar—my precious gold!" whimpered the old man, as he hobbled toward the bundle, closely followed by the boy miner, whose revolver was at his head all the time.

"Shell it out, then—quick! Now jump down the hill and hunt your cover!"

As though impelled by the same spring, the two sprung over the bank into the hollow, a rifle-bullet passing over their heads.

CHAPTER II.

THE AMBUSH SPRUNG.

DEXTROUSLY kicking his precious bundle before him, the old man sprung nimbly across the narrow space that intervened, disappearing from view of the outlaws, who were highly amused at the success of their little comedy, before they even suspected anything wrong.

Little Volcano followed the "pilgrim's" example, but not one moment too soon. Three-Fingered Jack saw that more was being played than was down in the bill, and broke cover, sending a hasty shot after his refractory pupil, but which only hastened Little Volcano's descent as the ragged bullet hissed past his ear.

The trail running between Hangtown and Hard Luck at this point wound along the hillside, where a level ledge of near fifty yards in width afforded a natural road-bed. Upon the right, or rather toward the east, the ledge sloped down, almost perpendicular for twenty feet; beyond this was an irregular level space, thickly studded with boulders, bushes and stunted trees. Down this declivity the two miners had sprung.

Scrambling to his feet, the old man darted away with an activity remarkable for one of his years, closely followed by Little Volcano, whose voice rung out in a merry peal of laughter at the success of his ruse.

"Kiver, youngster—thar burns more powder!" cried the old man, as the angry yells of the outwitted road-agents blended with several pistol-shots. "Kiver—quick! They're so blamed keerless they'd jist as soon hit a feller as not!"

Little Volcano promptly obeyed, plunging headforemost into a clump of bushes which grew beside a large boulder; but not so the old man. Wheeling quickly, he threw up his rifle, scarce waiting until it reached a level ere touching the hair-trigger.

A muffled, choking howl of agony followed, and flinging aloft his arms, leaping far out from the ledge, one of the road-agents plunged heavily down upon the boulders, a lifeless mass. The Scorchers had reached the end of his earthly trail.

"Whoo-oop!" recklessly yelled the man, tossing back his long hair in the mountain breeze, as he dextrously reloaded his rifle, making no effort to seek cover. "Whoo-oop! whar's the next critter as wants to buck against the untamed waugh-horse o' the desert? Hyar I stan', the biggest little man as ever wore ha'r! My name's 'tarnal death to sinners, an' when I light onto 'em, it's like a double an' twisted yearth-quake a-bustin'! Hyar I stan', ragged an' dirty, the bob-tailed bull of Salt river, as kin—"

"Cover, you old fool! D'y' want to stand up there and get shot like a hog in a pen?" angrily yelled Little Volcano, as he sprung up and took a snap shot at the outlaws, just in time to divert the aim of Three-Fingered Jack, whose bullet cut a lock of hair from the old man's temple.

"Mebbe 'twould be as well," coldly replied that worthy, as the road-agents dodged back again. "I jest wanted to coax the onmannerly varmints down hyar, so we could just nat'ally chaw 'em up an' spit 'em to thunder. But they won't come—they hain't got no sense o' fun in 'em—not a durned bit!" and he sniffed contemptuously as he crouched down beside the boy miner.

"They'll come fast enough to suit your health—don't you be uneasy on that score. If you've tramped these diggings long, you'd ought to know that Three-Fingered Jack is a bulldog that doesn't loose his grip until the piece comes out—once let him taste blood," said Little Volcano, keeping a keen watch along the ledge with pistol ready for instant use.

"All as comes won't go back ag'in on thar own legs," quietly returned the old man. "They—"

He rapidly leveled his rifle, but lowered it without firing.

"They're wuss'n a forty-legged flea! A streak o' greased lightnin' couldn't ketch aim at 'em afore they dodge back—"

"Mind! I believe they're coming!"

"No sech luck—they're jist prospectin' to see ef we've puckacheed. They won't show a patch o' hide big enough to kiver a bullet, long 's we're hyar—wuss luck!" grumbled the old man in the tone of one who feels himself defrauded of his just dues.

"You don't seem quite as bad scared now as when we were up yonder," half laughed Little Volcano, after a pause of silent watching.

"Who wouldn't be skeered when he was walkin' along peac'bly thinkin' o' nothin', to hev a whale of a feller—a reg'lar mounting on wheels—"

"Easy, stranger," muttered the boy miner, his cheek flushing. "I know I'm little, but I'm big enough to mount any man that pokes fun at me."

"I 'cept your 'pology—don't say anythin' more 'bout it—I ain't one to b'ar hard feelin's—"

He paused abruptly, half raising his rifle, his keen gray eyes fairly glowing as he watched a small stone bounding down the slope nearly two hundred yards above their position.

"The imps is at work," he muttered, never lowering his gaze. "Keep a good watch above and below us. Somebody set that dornick a-rollin'—they ain't no frost in the ground to loosen it. They think to git around us an' pick us off from ahind."

"They can do that without giving us a show, if they take trouble enough," said the youth, thoughtfully. "There's cover enough there to hide a thousand, and within easy range, too."

"Four to one an' playin' a sneak game like that! Darn such ornary, onperlite, mossbacked scrubs anyway! They hain't got no more sense o' fun than a lame, one-legged hoppergrass ketched out courtin' by a black frost."

"That's good enough, but while we're talkin', they're working. We can't cover both sides here—"

"They's only one thing to do—we've got to puckachee, hot foot—"

"I hate to run from 'em," muttered Little Volcano.

"Who said anythin' 'bout runnin' from 'em? We're goin' fer 'em! They think we're fools. They sot that rock a-rollin' jest to scare us, then they jumped clean over, and hunkered down some're below, a-openin' thar tater-traps fer us to run right smack in—an' that's jest what we're gwine to do," gravely interposed the old man.

"It does sound better that way," laughed Little Volcano. "How is it? You first or I?"

"Don't be snatched. Let 'em git scattered as fur as they like—they won't be so much chance o' thar drappin' us. Git ready fer a run—do your tallest jumpin' an' dodgin', an' ef you see a blue pill a-comin', don't try to knock it out o' the way with your noddle."

All around was still and seemingly peaceful. Only the usual sounds of a summer day amid the mountains—the faint, fitful breeze agitating the dense foliage; the occasional bark of the pine squirrel, feeble and irresolute, as though half-ashamed of himself for breaking the silence, but then, taking courage from the ringing call of the gaudy cardinal grosbeak, he twitched his bushy tail vivaciously, *chit-chirring*—only to cease abruptly and dart high up the towering pine.

The old hunter pointed significantly at this; plain as the page of a printed book the squirrel's movement was to him.

From the roadbed alone could their bit of cover guard them. From behind, where the scrubby bushes and thick-lying boulders afforded cover in abundance, they would be entirely exposed to the aim of any enemy in that quarter. The rolling stone, the affrighted squirrel and red-bird, told the quickwitted hunter that the road-agents had reasoned the same, and were losing no time in putting the plan into execution. Down the valley, then, lay their only hope of escape.

"Now, then—both together—play you was a hop-toad as has swallowed a red-hot tumblebug! Now, laigs, do your duty!"

Leaving their cover the two men darted down the valley at top speed, dodging, twisting, leaping over boulders, tearing through or doubling around bushes with a celerity little short of marvelous.

A yell of angry surprise—another and another; then came a sharp, spiteful crack as Three-Fingered Jack sent a bullet after the fugitives from his "pea-shooter"—a louder detonation as the contents—bullets and slugs—of the carbines followed suit; but back came a defiant yell and a taunting laugh from the miners.

"Whoo-ee!" squeaked the old man, turning abruptly and raising his rifle, hoping to catch an outlaw napping. "Whar's the two-legged critter as wants to mount the 'tarnal stud-hoss o' Gibraltar? Hyar I stan'—six foot fo' o' c'lar grit, nary sand-crack, puff nor wind-gall—my breff pizens tumble-bugs—I kin look a hole through a forty-foot wall—when I sit down it makes yearthquakes—when I squeel, the glorious eagle bird pulls out its tail feathers in despair—when I blow my bugle it makes harry-canes, an' when I chomps my teeth—"

His rifle spoke spitefully. A half-stifled scream followed by a spluttering volley of curses told that the bullet had not sped in vain.

Shrilly the old man laughed as he turned and darted nimbly after Little Volcano, reloading his weapon as he ran.

"We've gone far enough, haven't we?" panted the young miner, after a spell. "If they care to follow us, let them. We're good for the lot

—you settled another one's hash, from that yell."

"Just cured his toothache on one side," chuckled the old man. "The fool peeked out from ahind a rock an' I didn't wait fer no more, but jest socked a bullet through his cheek. They's fo' uv 'em yit, but I don't scarcely think they'll foller us any furdur. We ain't the kinder critters they mostly hanker a'ter, I don't reckon."

"If we had only settled that cussed Three-Fingers I wouldn't care. His head would bring a clean fifteen hundred—and that'd come mighty handy just now—"

"I hope to ge-mently you're bu'sted—that you hain't got a red cent—ef I don't, hope may never see the back o' my neck!"

The lad's cheek flushed hotly and his eye began to glow, but the old man grasped his arm and stepped aside into a clump of bushes. After a quick glance around, he untied his shabby bundle. An involuntary cry parted the young miner's lips. A yellow pile—glittering in places, dull in others—a pile of golden coin, of nuggets, of little bags containing gold-dust.

"Thar's my reason—five thousan' or more o' 'em. The half uv 'em is your'n; help yourself!" and he chuckled again as he filled his pipe.

"What do you take me for—a beggar—"

"Shet up—ef you gits your back up, blamed ef I don't mount ye an' chaw your ear—I will so!" Beggar nothin'! Ef 'twasn't fer you, whar'd that be? Whar'd I be? Deader'n a tumblebug under a waggon-wheel. I'm a' old beaver—some folks 'd say I wasn't worth the powder it'd take to blow me to ge-lory—but I count myself wuth the hafe o' that, anyhow. Take it or leave it—but ef ye leave it, look out fer yer year—I'll chaw it tell the cows come home!"

"Tie up your bundle, stranger—ear-chewing or not, we'll have to argue this matter a little first. We can do that as we go along, for I reckon you're bound my way?"

"To Hard Luck? that's the eend o' my trail for the present, yas. They've got a big bank thar—no limit—I'm goin' to bu'st it. That's my name—bank-bu'ster! I cleaned 'em out at Hangtown—that's part o' the proceeds; the rest I cached. Bless you, boy, I've got more'n a million such caches all over the kentry. Whenever I hear tell on a big game, I strike fer it. I mount the tiger an' jest nat'ally chaw his alabaster year ontill he don't know which eend his tail feathers grows on. Something's got to bu'st. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's the bank—generally more bank than me. Mebbe you've heard tell on me—a good many people hev. I'm one o' the curiosities o' natur'—like the big trees—like a b'iled shirt an' shiny boots in the diggin's—"

"Who are you, anyway? If we haven't met before, then I've dreamt of you—"

"Zimri—old Zimri Coon—that's my Sunday-go-to-meetin' handle. I don't reckon we've ever met afore. I've got a good eye an' a most 'mazin' memory. 'Pears like I'd know ye ag'in ef we'd ever met. No, lad, you're yelpin' on the wrong trail now, 'deed you is, honey!" earnestly replied the old man—so earnestly, indeed, that the boy miner's suspicions were strengthened rather than appeased.

"No, lad, I don't reckon we've ever knowed each other afore, but 'twon't be my fault ef we don't git 'quainted right smart afore we quit. You don't 'pear to hev any pardner—no more hev I—but I want one, dretful bad—I do so! Ef thar's one failin' I've got bigger'n another, it's bein' too fond o' the pizen sar-pint what bites an' stings a feller ontill he jests gits up on his tail-feathers an' crows ge-lory to the ram! That's poetry fer whiskey. 'Tain't offen I git in that way—only after I've bu'sted a bank; but them's the times I need a 'fectionate pard what'll do his duty—rock me to sleep 'th a brickbat or comb my ha'r 'ith a pine knot untill I gits reasonable ag'in. You'd jest suit me—an' ef I didn't suit you, twouldn't be for the want o' tryin', anyhow. Jest think it over, as we go 'long—fer I don't reckon thar's any use in waitin' hyar any longer fer them critters."

"Do you know what I've been thinking—something Three-Fingered Jack said, that I didn't notice untill now. You know the stage is about due from Hangtown. He spoke of big game—I half believe they're laying for the coach!"

"Like enough—they's used to sech tricks. Well—just spit it out, honey—I see you've got a' idee. Whatever it is, count old Zimri in fer one hafe."

"They won't dream of our coming back—we could take 'em by surprise, and perhaps bag the lot—anyhow we could spoil their fun with the stage, and—"

"The fun's commenced—lis'en!"

From up the valley came the sounds of firing—of loud yells and piercing screams!

CHAPTER III.

A NOVEL CHASE.

"We war too slow a-thinkin'—the jamboree's begun—" sputtered Zimri Coon, but Little Volcano didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. He darted at full speed toward the point from

whence proceeded the sounds of conflict, apparently only a few hundred yards distant.

Old Zimri followed closely upon the boy miner's heels, no less eager than he to take a hand in the sport, yet, with characteristic vigor, he kept up a running fire of cautions, mixed with grumblings, to all of which the youth turned a deaf ear.

From directly above them came the sounds of conflict. The shouts and curses of men, the terrified snorting and trampling of horses—and high above all the shrill voice of a woman, not raised in terror, but evidently soundly berating some person or persons.

Without a moment's hesitation Little Volcano scrambled up the steep incline, aided by the points of rock, the stunted shrubs and creepers which covered the face of the rocks, and close behind came Zimri Coon.

"Both together, lad—don't be so 'tarnally brash!" he sputtered, making an ineffectual grasp at the boy's heel. "Both together, or ye'll spile the fun—don't you got no manner of sense a-tall?"

Little Volcano obeyed, though involuntarily. His foot slipped from a mossy projection, and only for the quick hand of the old man, he must have been precipitated to the bottom. But Zimri steadied him, and then, totally forgetting his own advice, the old man sprang ahead and scrambled nimbly up and over the escarpment.

A dusty, travel-stained and weather-beaten stage, now turned over upon its side, with the upper wheels still revolving, three horses plunging and kicking, and the off-leader lying in a quivering heap, the blood gurgling from a bullet-hole in its temple, while a single man was seeking to undo the tangled harness. Several other men were dodging around, yelling, cursing, and occasionally firing a pistol-shot at the coach. These shots were returned, with regularity if not effect. A hand would be thrust up through the door, clasp a huge Colt's army pistol, a bullet would be sent—quite as frequently through the treetops far up the mountain as anywhere near the yelling robbers.

Such was the picture that met the astonished eyes of Zimri Coon as he sprang upon the level ledge. Yet quick as thought his rifle was leveled and discharged, at the first enemy that caught his eye.

"Whoo-ee!" he yelled, shrilly, as he sprang forward, drawing a revolver and dropping the empty rifle. "Wake up, sinners, an' prepar' fer a double and twisted exeet out o' this vale o' sorrow an' nat'ral cussedness 'thout time fer 'pentin'! Cl'ar the track—give room fer your betters to spread tharselves—hyar we come—whoo-ee!"

The sudden onslaught—the loss of another of their number completed the discomfiture of the road-agents, begun as it had been by the unexpected fusillade from the stage-coach. And as the two—for Little Volcano played a good second to Zimri's wild screeching—now dashed forward, Three-Fingered Jack and his surviving comrades took to flight, making the best of their way back along the trail, cursing their folly in allowing themselves to be drawn so far from their horses by the chase of the two miners.

But they were not pursued. A plump figure suddenly shot up half-way through the open half of the upper door, then stuck fast, unable to retreat or advance. The figure of a woman, despite the ludicrous air of rakishness imparted by a battered and disarranged bonnet cocked over one ear, and the still smoking pistol clasped in her hand.

"Boost—why don't you boost, Champion! Push as though you had some—ugh!"

The exhortation was abruptly terminated. Describing a wonderful parabola, the woman came to the ground with a thud. A bald, shining pate followed through the opening, and a pair of watery blue eyes peered dolefully down upon the prostrate female.

"Laugh—why don't you snicker?" snapped the woman, casting a disdainful glance toward the miners, whose risibles were naturall excited by the farce so quickly following the tragedy.

"If you had any politeness at all you'd offer to help a body rather than to stand grinning there like two Cheshire cats—"

A stifled cry for help, coming from the interior of the coach, caused Little Volcano to spring forward, while old Zimri hastened to the aid of the driver, lest the horses should inflict further damage.

Wrenching open the battered door, Little Volcano pulled out the little bald-headed man, thus revealing a bundle of disarranged dry-goods lying partially beneath the seats. From this emanated the smothered cries, and the boy miner soon succeeded in resolving the mass into a young woman, just as the elder lady pushed him aside.

The animals were quickly freed from their predicament, the dead horse rolled over the bank after being stripped of its harness, and then, after considerable difficulty, the coach was righted, proving to have suffered but little from the upset.

"You was jest in time, stranger—'twas the dirtiest snarl I ever was ketched in!" quoth the driver, for the first time at liberty to thank his assistant. "I on'y wish you 'a' drapped more o' the 'farnal galoots—just think o' them shoot-

in' down poor Devil-bug! the best leader as ever chomped a snaffle!"

"Count yourself lucky that it wasn't you; Three-Fingered Jack would think no more of one than t'other. But—"

Little Volcano turned abruptly as a gentle hand touched his arm. He stood as though petrified—only the hot blood shot tingling through every vein, and his breath came by fits and starts.

A pair of eyes, black, large and luminous, softened now almost to tears, fairly met his own. Above was a mass of wavy black hair, still disordered from the accident. Soft, rosy cheeks, full, red lips, a slight, graceful figure, not yet fully developed, yet already giving promise of admirable symmetry. A musical voice sounded in his ears—he knew that she was thanking him for his services, but the words were lost in the dizzy whirl of his brain. What he replied he never knew. For the time being he seemed in a dream.

"I reckon those critters thort they'd run ker-flump into a bal' ho'nets' nest when you opened on 'em with that blunderbuss, boss," chuckled Zimri, addressing the little bald-headed man, after inspecting the corpse of the road-agent.

"I didn't—" he began, helplessly, looking around for the aid that did not fail him.

"Bless you, sir," said the plump woman; "he didn't do it—he wouldn't touch a pistol, much less shoot it off, for all the gold in Californy. You know—" and her voice lowered confidentially: "he is a poet—a most extraordinary genius, I assure you. Champion, dear, this gentleman wishes an introduction. Mr. Hector Champion—"

"Zimri Coon—that's my han'le. Old Zim, the ongodly sometimes call me, fer short."

"All aboard!" cried the driver, who had hitched up the three horses. "Gentlemen, ef you're travelin' our way, an' 'll accept a lift, you'll do me proud."

"We was footin' it to Hard Luck, but sence you ax it, I reckon we mought as well ride—thar's no tellin' what them ornary cusses may try to do, an' ladies ain't so plenty out hyar in the howlin' wilderness as we kin 'ford to let 'em run any onnecessary risk," laughed old Zim.

Little Volcano managed to pluck up courage enough to assist the young lady, whose lustrous eyes and soft voice had wrought such havoc with his usual equilibrium, into the stage, and then clambered up beside his comrade.

Naturally enough the conversation turned upon the events of the day, but the boy miner was unusually silent. He could think of nothing other than the fair maiden then seated below him, and before a mile had been traversed he secretly admitted that he was "badly struck." And blushed so furiously at the admission that Coon thumped him vigorously upon the back, declaring him threatened with an attack of apoplexy.

The scenery was rudely magnificent. The trail wound through stupendous masses of rock, now winding along the mountain side with a precipice above, a yawning abyss below; now crawling up, up, until it seemed as though the coach was bound for the fleecy, fantastic cloud-lands, again rattling down an incline so steep as to render the massive brake useless.

"Thar's the burg!" said Billy Breeze, the driver, pulling up to breathe his cattle after an unusually long and tough pull. "Thar you see Hard Luck—just a little the red-hottest, rip-snortin' git-up-and-cuss-your-boots-off-o'-ye town as was ever located on bed-rock—you bet!"

Two miles as the crow flies, strung along the banks of a diminutive river, "Saltpeter Creek"—deep down in a verdant valley the town lay, composed of perhaps one hundred buildings, from a tattered canvas shanty up to a slab "palace."

"Now, gentlemen," quoth Billy, gathering up the reins and throwing forward the brake, "Just narve yourselves for a little o' the ha'r-raisnest ridin' you ever 'sperienced. We're going down the devil's chute—an' it ar' a screamer—you hear me!"

And a minute later, as the stage turned an abrupt curve, the "outsiders" mentally agreed that the name was well bestowed. For full one-quarter of a mile the steep descent continued in a true line, then disappearing behind a point of rocks. Though level, the trail was in no place more than five yards wide; in several, even less. Upon the right hand yawned an abyss, hundreds of feet in depth.

Gripping the rail, they held fast with bated breath as the heavy, lumbering coach forced the three horses into a trot, despite the brake.

A sharp cry broke from the driver's lips, as he flung his whole weight upon both reins and brake. A sharp crash and jingling sound followed—the coach plunged heavily forward upon the wheels. Yet the two miners were not at a loss to account for the cry.

Just ahead of them, perched upon a point of rock which jutted out over the road, was an enormous grizzly bear, gaunt and half-famished, seemingly crouched for a spring.

"The brake's busted!" gasped Billy. "An' thar's the turn—Lord hev mercy on our souls!"

Snorting madly, the horses plunged ahead at full speed, urged on by the heavy coach. On it

thundered, leaping and bouncing, swaying from side to side, threatening with every moment to overturn, when inevitable death awaited the passengers. On past the crouching grizzly went the horses, too terrified to swerve from their course.

The snarling brute made its leap. The huge body struck upon the back of the coach, then, unable to retain its footing, fell heavily to the ground. Roaring with pain and rage it arose and lumbered after the flying stage.

Not an eye was turned toward it. A greater peril stared them in the face. The abrupt curve was now close at hand. Even if the snorting horses were to keep in the trail, it would be almost impossible for the vehicle to follow. Its momentum would almost certainly carry it over the rock-piled verge, to sure death and destruction upon the bowlders below.

As with one accord, Coon and Little Volcano grasped the reins with Breeze and added their strength to his. Fortunately the leather held. The animals were almost lifted from their feet, and the speed of the coach was scarcely lessened an atom—still it was checked in a degree.

Around the curve darted the cattle. The stage whirled around upon two wheels, the others whizzed in the air, and all seemed lost. Then one wheel struck against a bowlder—the stage was whirled almost against the wall—but the greatest danger was past, and Billy Breeze, with a husky yell of exultant thanksgiving, once more thought of guiding his team. And one minute later they were jolting over the level road at the foot of the mountains.

"I'd rather eat soup with the devil than try that on ag'in!" muttered old Zimri, wiping his brow and glancing back. "Ge-thunder! yender comes that 'farnal grizzly!"

Around the curve lumbered the huge brute, thoroughly aroused by its awkward tumble, and evidently bound on avenging its discomfiture.

"Jest slow her up a bit, pard," chuckled Coon, as he unslung his rifle and looked to its cap. "We'll take that pile o' meat into camp an' set up a fust-class butcher-shop—you hear me!"

Despite their mad ride, Billy found his cattle hard to manage. Either their terror had not yet subsided, or else they had caught scent of the dreaded beast. Certain it is that they tore on with scarcely-abated speed, despite the strong pull upon their jaws.

Doggedly the grizzly pursued them, now slightly lessening the distance as the horses tired. Old Zimri, growing impatient, tried a flying shot, but, though the brute was wounded, the hurt only increased its speed. Snorting furiously, he bounded forward.

"Whoop!" suddenly cried Billy; "the fore-wheel's gi'n out! Ketch hold! thar it goes!"

The injured wheel gave way, and the unlucky stage plunged into the bank. The three men were hurled to the ground. From the inside came cries of terror and pain.

And, snarling, bloodthirsty, the grizzly bear rushed forward to its revenge!

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE VOLCANO CREATES A SENSATION.

THERE was scant time for reflection after Billy Breeze uttered his startling warning. Almost ere the two outside passengers realized the new danger threatening them, the injured wheel gave way, the lumbering stage-coach upsetting and casting the trio heavily to the ground. Fortunately the soil at this spot was unusually free from stones, else the maddened grizzly might have found its task rendered even more easy.

The terrified horses plunged and kicked furiously, seeking to free themselves from the tangled harness, but one was pinned down upon its side by the poles, and its plunging only served to baffle its companions.

Zimri Coon was the first of the trio to scramble to his feet, still clasping the barrel of his broken rifle, while the other hand was busied in gouging the dirt from his eyes. But only for a moment did he think of himself. A broken, bewildered cry from the lips of Little Volcano restored his eyesight and cool wits with astonishing rapidity. He saw the boy miner lying close beside the fallen horse, striving to free himself from beneath the footboard, while the iron-shod hoofs more than once in their mad lashing fairly bruised his head.

With a powerful effort that tore one boot half-off the lad's foot, Coon succeeded in rescuing his new partner from his perilous situation. And not one moment too soon.

From close behind his back resounded a loud, peculiar sniff—almost snort—so close that it fairly caused his tangled hair to raise as though inclined to stand on end; so close that the hot, reeking breath seemed to scorch his skin.

With an involuntary yell of terror, the old man leaped forward with wonderful agility. He had heard a similar sound more than once, but never before so close. And as he bounded aside, his flesh crawled and smarted as though the terrible claws had actually reached their mark instead of merely adding a little more to the wonderful embroidery of his garments.

Little Volcano also heard the fierce challenge, and despite the mingled blood and dirt which obscured his eyesight, realized his peril in its

full force. Springing aside, he stumbled against the fallen horse, tumbling over it and falling full against the hips of the near wheeler. One second later and the boy miner would have received the full force of the terrified brute's iron-shod heels: as it was, he was simply flung back between the wheels of the stage without further injury.

Doubly foiled, the wounded grizzly attacked the fallen horses, burying claws and muzzle in the animal's quivering flanks. One horrible, almost human-like scream of agony—a single stroke of the huge paw; then the horse lay quivering with broken back, while the grizzly growled with satisfaction over its bloody feast.

With one mad plunge that dragged the coach nearly atop of the beast, the two horses stripped their harness and darted away toward Hard Luck.

The death-shriek of his dying pet aroused Billy Breeze more effectually than aught else could have done. He saw the ravening beast tearing and mutilating his dumb friend. He felt for the knife that usually rested upon his hip. It, together with his pistols, was gone—lost when he was hurled to the ground. All unarmed though he was, it seemed as though he meant to attack the monster with his bare hands.

"Here!" abruptly cried old Zimri Coon, thrusting a revolver into his hand. "Sock it to the devil—it's eyther him or us!"

The words were almost drowned by the double report. Stricken hard, for scarce two yards divided the weapons from the brute's body, the bear snarled furiously with rage and pain, turning abruptly upon his assailants.

With a warning cry the old man sprang nimbly aside, his pistol sending bullet after bullet in quick succession into the shaggy mass. Billy Breeze followed this example, but unfortunately one foot caught in a portion of the tangled harness, and he fell at full length, right before the grizzly. Death seemed inevitable.

Coon fired his last shot, but seemingly without effect. He sprang forward with a shrill cry though his only weapon was a clubbed pistol. But quick as he was, another was even more rapid. A light form passed him and alighted fairly upon the shaggy brute's back. A pistol-muzzle was thrust against the bear's ear. A muffled report—the grizzly plunged heavily forward, falling half-over the bewildered driver, tearing the moist ground with its long claws. But the effort was only spasmodic. The leaden pellet had sunk deep down in its brain, and the King of the Mountains lay there in its blood, naught more than a helpless mass of quivering flesh.

"Ge-thunder! hurraw fer hooray!" yelled old Zimri, capering around like one possessed, or a Ute squaw at a "pine-nut wedding" where the whisky is free. "You 'farnal little squeegee—you—you—! Oh! somebody do hold me while I—"

"Help him out," interrupted Little Volcano, as a muffled cry for help came to his ears from the overturned stage. "I'm afraid there's worse luck in yonder!"

With a little effort the upper door was unfastened and flung back. First the pale, terrified face of Hector Champion appeared; seemingly unable to help himself, a vigorous push from inside sent him headlong to the torn and trampled ground. Then his wife raised the limp form of the young girl through the aperture. Her face was white as death, save where the red blood slowly trickled from a cut above the temple.

Little Volcano took the precious burden in his arms, but there was a strange impression at his heart such as he had never experienced before, and he almost sunk beneath the light weight as the fear assailed him that she was dead.

Mrs. Champion quickly relieved him and bore the girl to a little grass-plot, sending Little Volcano after water, while she loosened the maiden's garments and bathed her brow with the few drops of whisky left in Coon's metal flask.

The boy miner darted at full speed toward the creek as the nearest point where he felt sure of finding water, snatching up the driver's glazed sombrero as he started. He saw that the alarm had been given to the town, either by the report of fire-arms or the runaway horses, and now quite a crowd were hurrying at top speed toward the scene of the accident. Their questions fell upon unheeding ears, as the lad dashed by, his only thoughts given to the fair young creature whom he had so strangely encountered, and in whom he felt such a deep interest.

He returned with the dripping hat, but found that its contents were not required. To his great joy he found the girl conscious, though still faint and bewildered. From a little distance he stood gazing upon her, his soul in his eyes. Even then, wan and blood-stained, her hair disheveled, her garments tattered and disarranged, she seemed an angel of light in his eyes.

Suddenly he started and turned quickly, his face flushing hotly, then turning to a sickly pallor. He heard these words, uttered in a low, drawling tone:

"She'd make a mighty purty bit o' flesh. onc'!"

she was rigged up, you hear me! I've got the rocks as says she won't live in Hard Luck two weeks afore she makes another onto Long Tom's string of petticoats."

The tone, more than the words, stung Little Volcano. He read in them a foul insult to the young girl, sounding all the worse that she seemed now so helpless and defenseless.

The speaker was a tall, gaunt fellow, apparently middle-aged. His shoulders were broad, his arms muscular, but there was a looseness in his build, an awkward clumsiness in his carriage that matched well with the dull, sleepy, yet brutish expression of his long, bony face. The watery, bleared eyes of light blue had a slinking, foxy cast especially disagreeable.

All this the boy miner took in at a glance, and as quickly read the character of the man. His hand dropped from the revolver butt upon which it had instinctively closed, though he had no notion of letting the insulting speech pass unnoticed.

Gliding forward he tapped the man sharply upon the shoulder. Cowering beneath the touch, he shuffled aside, one hand seeking the revolver at his belt—the air and motion of a criminal who imagines he is "wanted." But as he noticed the comparatively slight figure of the lad—a mere boy, as he believed—his courage returned, and angry at his own fears, he sharply demanded, with an oath:

"What ye want? who air you, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," was the quiet reply. "Maybe you would be so kind as to tell me your name?"

"What's it your business, you little tadpole on legs? The impudence o' some galoots—"

"Are you ashamed of it, that you dare not answer?" sneeringly interrupted Little Volcano, his eyes glowing.

"Shamed nothin'! My name's a man's name, shore pizen to little ribs as puts on the airs of a man afore they've left off breech-clouts. Go home, sonny, an' let yer mammy put ye to bed afore ye git a good round spankin' fer stickin' yer nose into men's business," and the fellow laughed loudly at his own smartness.

"Will you tell me his name, sir?" requested the boy miner, of a quiet-looking man standing near.

"Certainly—he calls himself Sleepy George now; but he changes his name every time he steals a horse or goes through a drunken miner."

Again laughing loudly, though this time it sounded even more forced than before, the fellow replied:

"That's my name—Sleepy George—an' it's the name of a high-toned cuss, too, you bet!"

"It's the name of a dirty, foul-mouthed scoundrel!" cried Little Volcano, stepping toward the bully. "I heard your words a few moments ago, and unless you get down upon your knees and apologize for them, you'll never leave this spot until your friends—if such a low-lived craven has any friends—carry you off on a litter."

The sharp interchange of words had attracted the attention of the entire party, and the Hard-Luckians gathered around in hopes of a new sensation. Old Zimri Coon edged toward the big bully, one hand upon a revolver.

Sleepy George made a motion as though about to draw a pistol, but the low murmur that ran through the crowd warned him that such a course would result in an outbreak under which he would fare but ill. Still he could not retreat. He measured the lithe figure before him, and probably his first opinion was confirmed, for he lifted one huge foot and kicked viciously at the boy miner.

Little Volcano sprung past the foot, and leaping up, planted his fists, one—two, heavily in the bully's face. Small and delicate as those fists looked, they sounded like the stroke of a hammer against a half-dried hide, cutting to the bone, and Sleepy George went down like a log!

The "manly art" was a dead-letter among the miners, as a rule. Where lead or steel were waved, "rough-and-tumble" was the usual method of deciding disputes, and knowing this, Little Volcano acted upon it without a scruple.

He sprung upon the fallen bully's breast, plying both fists in a hailstorm of blows that seemed enough to beat in a skull of iron. And so effective was the visitation that the little starts of surprise at the easy overthrow of the bully by a seeming boy, had scarcely time to subside, before Sleepy George, thoroughly cowed, begged for mercy.

Little Volcano removed the weapons from the man's belt, then arose, saying in a deep tone:

"Kneel down, there, and beg my pardon. Say that you are a foul-mouthed liar. You know me now—if you are wise you will do as I bid you."

Though with an ill-grace, Sleepy George obeyed, and then slunk away, after one vindictive glare at his conqueror, amid the jeers and taunts of the crowd.

"You served him right, stranger," said the same man who had given the bully's name. "But you'd better sleep with both eyes open. That rascal is worse than a rattlesnake. He will strike you when you least expect it. And he has strong backing, too. As a friend," and he lowered his voice; "as a friend and well-

wisher, look out for Long Tom, if you mean to stop long in town."

Little Volcano was about to ask him to speak clearer, when the arrival of a couple of fresh horses from the stage-office, and the bustle occasioned by the righting of the coach and rigging a drag to serve in place of the wheel which had been broken, diverted his attention. But it was not long ere the warning was remembered.

He saw the young girl assisted into the stage, and though he dared not address her, he managed to attract Mrs. Champion's attention, and from her learned that Mary—the first time he had heard her name—had escaped material injury, and would probably be none the worse for the double accident on the morrow. Right light-heartedly he mounted beside old Zimri, upon the stage, and once more their journey was resumed, attended by the crowd of Hard-Luckians, who were loudly discussing the accident and the little by-play in which Sleepy George was so mercilessly handled. Despite his natural courage, Little Volcano could not entirely suppress a shudder as he overheard bets offered and taken on the number of days which would pass before the discomfited bully wiped out his defeat with a knife-thrust or a bullet from ambush.

A number of persons were standing before the door of the stage-office, when the coach rolled up. Among them was Sleepy George, standing behind a tall, finely-formed and well-dressed man, with the face of an archangel and the form of an Apollo.

As Mrs. Champion and Mary alighted, this man strode forward and lifted the veil that covered the maiden's face. Mary shrunk back with a little cry. Quick as thought Little Volcano sprung between them, thrusting the audacious fellow back. With a curse he thrust a hand into his bosom, but the same instant a revolver stared him in the face, and over the leveled tube a blue eye flashed back his look of hatred.

"Drap it, you overgrown warmint!" gritted old Zimri, leaping forward as Sleepy George drew a revolver. "Drap that weapon an' git—or I'll blow a hole in yer karkidge a mule could jump through!"

The crowd began to gather around, and again an ominous murmur rose. The tall man seemed to recognize it, and his expression changed like magic, as he said:

"I'll see you again, young man. I've got you down here," tapping his breast, then turning away.

The little, quiet man touched the boy miner's arm.

"Remember what I told you. That's Long Tom."

Little Volcano turned and followed old Zimri, feeling that he had made at least two bitter enemies that day.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE ACQUAINTANCE.

A CLEAR, bright morning. The air, cool and bracing, came down from the mountains, rustling the pines and cedars, playing through the boughs of the red-wood, toying with the fragrant azaleas before sweeping down through the rocky gorges out upon the level, sandy wastes beyond.

Wild and magnificent was the scenery. Ruined castles of rock; with here and there a tower still standing, half hidden by the black cedars and clinging vines. Rude fortresses with their walls and outer defenses half demolished, ramparts battered and crumbling, eaten by the tooth of frost. A thousand defaced figures of a bygone age—of monstrous statues in the remains of which a fanciful eye could still trace a resemblance to the weird, fantastic creations of ancient mythology.

But the desecrating touch of man was marring the whole. Unheeding the wild beauties surrounding him upon every hand, with eyes only for the especial object of his search, the prospector shattered rocks, turned over the yellow clay, keenly watching for evidence of gold.

It was Little Volcano. For nearly a week he had been thus occupied, as yet with trifling success.

A sound—strange enough for that time and place, deep in the heart of the mountains—startled him from his labor. The rapid clatter of iron-clad hoofs upon the rocky soil, coming from down the narrow defile.

The boy miner cast a rapid glance behind him. Twenty yards beyond lay the edge of a deep, dark pit rather than canyon, cutting across the little valley. Too wide for any mortal horse to leap, there was no way of passing it save by climbing the side cliffs, and they were so nearly perpendicular that a cat could not have scaled them.

"A fool or a madman!" muttered the boy miner as he crouched down behind a clump of bushes; but the next moment he sprung erect with a sharp cry of warning.

A piebald mustang dashed through the opening into the "pocket." Its blood-red nostrils widely dilated, its eyes protruding, its counter covered with flakes of foam, the animal seemed fairly beside itself with terror.

Upon its back, firmly seated despite its fran-

tic bounds, was a rider, young and fair; the long black hair broken from its fastenings and floating freely upon the breeze, the richly-rounded figure betrayed the woman, despite the fact of her being seated astride. Though pale as death, she seemed composed—strangely calm for one in the very arms of death. The broken reins dangled beyond her reach. The maddened mustang was entirely beyond her control.

Little Volcano had scant time for reflection. Ten seconds more would carry the horse and rider over the verge of the abyss, to most inevitable death upon the jagged rocks below. There was only one chance—a faint one at the best.

Too greatly terrified to notice aught, the mustang did not swerve from its course as the boy miner sprung out from his covert. A low, appealing cry broke from the woman's lips that nerved the arm of Little Volcano, and with a quick aim he discharged his pistol at the animal's head just before it came abreast of him.

His aim was true, the bullet buried itself in the mustang's brain, but nothing short of a thunderbolt could have checked its course in time to avoid the abyss.

One convulsive bound that flung its rider heavily from the saddle, then the death-stricken animal tottered upon the verge of the pit for a moment, ere plunging lifelessly down into the dark depths.

Little Volcano dropped his weapon and managed to partially break the young woman's fall, though her head and shoulders struck forcibly against the boulder over which he stumbled. For a moment or two he himself was stunned and bewildered, while the lady lay bleeding and insensible across his breast.

His first remembrance was that of hearing again the mad trampling of horses' hoofs along the defile, and believing the noise to be caused by the enemy from whom he concluded the woman was fleeing, he sought to rise, but weakness prevented. Still he managed to draw his other revolver, just as a horseman spurred into the pocket.

A hoarse cry broke from the stranger's lips as he caught sight of the prostrate figures, and wrenching up his animal with a grasp of iron, he leaped to the ground and lifted the woman to his bosom, covering her pale, blood-stained face with passionate kisses, mingling her name with prayer to the Holy Virgin for her recovery. Little Volcano realized his mistake, and put up his weapon, seating himself upon the boulder to which he owed the painful and swelling bump upon his head.

While the man was endeavoring to restore his lifeless burden, Little Volcano gazed upon him with quickening interest. And as he looked he became convinced that this was no common character.

A figure something above the medium height, compactly, yet not of remarkable muscular build, to a casual glance. Nevertheless, as time passed on, Little Volcano was to learn what almost marvelous powers were concealed beneath that unassuming exterior.

His face, though dark-skinned, was handsome, with clear-cut and determined features. High-arched brow, a drooping mustache, a pointed beard, together with hair that fell over his shoulders in profusion, and jetty black save where a keen eye could pick a thread of silver, here and there. His garments were those of a Mexican ranchero, of finest broadcloth, embroidered linen and muslin, though bearing evidence of rough usage in sundry rents and stains.

This much Little Volcano noted, then a little cry broke from his lips as he saw the woman's eyes open with a wondering stare. Quick as thought the Mexican turned toward him, a drawn pistol in his hand, and the boy miner distinguished the words:

"Not alive—never alive!"

"Easy there, stranger!" cried the boy miner, sharply, throwing up one hand. "Don't you know your friends when you see them?"

"I am my own friend—I know no other. But—who are you? Why are you spying around here?"

"That's rather cool!" cried Little Volcano, with a half-laugh, though the red deepened upon his cheek. "I might better ask you that question, since I have been in this hole since yesterday noon. And let me tell you, my friend, if I hadn't been spying around here, as you call it, the odds are that you would have had to look for your lady friend where her horse has gone—down the canyon yonder."

"'Tis true—he speaks true—he saved my life!" brokenly cried the woman, freeing herself and tottering toward Little Volcano, sinking at his feet and covering his hands with passionate kisses.

Her ardor frightened the boy miner far more than had the threatening looks of the Mexican, and he blushingly disclaimed her thanks.

"Is this true, señor?" asked the man, in a voice that trembled, despite his efforts at self-control.

"So far as shooting the horse—yes. But as for saving the lady, I fear she got an awkward fall over this rock. That was all—"

"It was everything—in saving her life, you

saved mine, for I could not live without her. Senor, I am poor, without friends or country—men call me a devil, forgetting that if I am such, 'twas their cruelty and injustice made me one. Bad as I am, I have still a heart—it is here!" and he drew the slight figure again to his breast. "I have no words to thank you—but they are here in my heart. Some day you may read them. Until that day I can only say, sir, I thank you from my soul!"

"That's more than enough, friend, for the little I was able to do. I'm only sorry that I could not save her from injury—and the mustang, too. It was a fine brute—"

The Mexican interrupted his speech with a torrent of curses so terrible and blasphemous that the boy miner, despite the rough and reckless life he had led for years, could scarcely keep from shuddering.

The cursing was cut short by the woman's sinking to the ground with a cry of pain as she attempted to stand alone. Now that the momentary excitement of thanking her preserver was past, she could no longer bear up against her injuries, far more serious than any had imagined.

Nerving himself with what seemed like the icy calmness of despair, the Mexican examined her hurts, finding her side, shoulder and head terribly bruised, though as far as he could tell no bones were broken. Little Volcano turned aside with a delicacy that did him honor, but could not resume his work, much less leave the spot until he learned the result of his strange adventure.

Despite his momentary feeling of disgust at the man's blasphemy, he found himself deeply interested in and longing to know more about him. Could he have guessed all that was to follow the acquaintance so strangely made, he would have taken to his heels like a terrified jack-rabbit.

"She cannot ride—the trail is long and rough—she would die before I could carry her there!" muttered the Mexican, glancing wistfully toward the boy miner. "Senor, you look kind-hearted—may I trust you? I know not what else to do."

"If I can help you in any way, don't be bashful," smiled Little Volcano. "It would be a mercy to me—I've been grubbing here like a mole until I am tired—and not a sign of pay-dirt."

"If you want gold I will give it to you—no," he added, hastily, as the lad's eyes flashed; "I don't mean to hire you, but favor for favor. You assist me to carry her—my wife—to where she can receive the assistance she needs so sorely, and I will show you where the gold lies in nuggets—enough to make you rich for life."

"It's a bargain!" cried Little Volcano, quickly. "Not that I ask pay for helping you, but if you know where there is so much gold, there surely must be enough for you and me too. We will go sharers in the placer—"

"Don't make any promises, senor, until you know me better," said the Mexican, smiling sadly. "I will give you the plan of the placer, or, if you still wish it, after all is told, I will show it to you. But now—to work. We must make a litter."

This was not difficult work. A couple of long, slender poles were cut, a pair of cross-pieces being securely tied, so as to make a frame-work three feet wide, with protruding handles. The Mexican's serape and a blanket taken from behind his saddle were quickly fashioned into a comfortable litter for the injured woman. Then, bidding the horse follow, the Mexican and Little Volcano raised the litter and set off down the defile.

The young miner's mind was busy enough. He could not help seeing that there was some mystery about his new acquaintance. The presence of the richly-dressed woman in such a wild, lonely region alone would evince as much, even without the enigmatical words of the Mexican.

For one moment a strange suspicion entered the youth's mind—but as quickly was it banished. This handsome, slight-built man could not be the demon incarnate common rumor painted. Besides the bloody deeds laid at his door, the picture drawn by those who affirmed their knowledge, was of a giant in size, an ogre in looks.

For full two hours they trudged on, without a word being spoken, with no interruption, save a few moments' pause now and then, for rest, or when a moan of pain broke from the sufferer's lips. Little Volcano began to grow curious as to the end of his journey. He had long since lost his bearings; the ground over which they passed was strange to him.

"See!" at length muttered the Mexican, pointing out a thin, fleecy column of smoke. "There is our resting-place!"

Entering a narrow defile, they wound along until presently emerging from a tangled clump of bushes, a dozen or more of tents and bush-huts appeared before them. Little Volcano uttered a sharp exclamation, as a number of men sprung toward them. Foremost was a tall, gaunt figure that he only too readily recognized.

The recognition was mutual. Flashing forth a long knife the man leaped forward with a

grating yell, showing his pointed wolf-fangs in a devilish grin.

It was Manuel Garcia—Three-Fingered Jack!

CHAPTER VI.

A QUEER ARTIST.

A HORRIBLE, unearthly voice resounded through the one street and numerous side trails of Hard Luck. Before the door of a wonderfully-constructed slab-palace, stood a little, pig-eyed, long-tailed and turn-up-toed Celestial, the wonder and envy of two "Johns" standing opposite. But Chough Lee elevated his pug-nose still nearer the summit of his close-shaved forehead, and belabored his old brass kettle with the close attention to business one might expect in Gabriel on the day of judgment.

Thus the barbarous sounds of civilization found utterance amidst the mountains of gold—awakening more curiosity and interest than if it had been the wild roar of a grizzly, or the thrilling echoes of a free fight.

"It's the grub call fer them as hangs-out at the new shebang," said Walking John, in explanation, to a friend fresh from up-country. "It's a high-toned affair, you bet—run by a woman, too, for her old man don't count for nothin'. But the young lady—thar you've got me, pard. I kinder reckon the Boss up yender," and Walking John turned one eye up at the pure blue sky, not irreverently—"I reckon He jest made two or three o' her sort and turned 'em out down hyar, to show us sinners what kind o' critters the angels is."

Secretly wondering what kind of animal Walking John meant, Tanglefoot proposed grubbing at the new outfit.

Above the door was tacked a canvas sign, bearing the legend, in irregular and somewhat demoralized letters:

"THE MINERS' REST,"

and beneath it in smaller letters, the name of our poetical friend, Hector Champion. The sign also bore a "moral drama" in two scenes. First: a living skeleton of an old miner, all in rags, fleeing from the personification of hunger, whose many-tined pitchfork was held in alarming proximity to the ragged trowsers of the fugitive. Second: Hunger lying prostrate beneath the miner, now grown into a second Daniel Lambert and seemingly bent on outdoing that worthy, were one to judge from the vigor with which he was attacking a mammoth loin of beef. A wonderful sign—one that had cost the worthy Champion many a weary hour and much paint.

The dining-hall was gotten up regardless of expense. The floor was of beaten clay, smooth and waterproof. The rough slab walls were covered from sight by white canvas. A dozen or more white pine tables—polished with an ax—garnished the room, surrounded by seats of the same material, the legs of both being firmly planted in the earth—prudence and economy combined. They could not be used as knock-down arguments in every heated discussion.

The hall was well filled. Mary Morton presided over the room, in a little inclosure at one end. Each person as he entered handed her two dollars, or its equivalent in dust. Mrs. Hector Champion was an advocate of "no credit."

Seated by themselves were the two men who were known to Hard Luck as Long Tom and Sleepy George. The latter was eating with a voracity that ill-matched his dull, lethargic looks, and listening to the words of his master.

"You are growing a more stupid fool with every day of your life," grated Long Tom, in anything but an amiable tone. "Full two weeks—and nothing accomplished yet! I'm losing all patience with you. One more chance—if you fail me in that, then you can go to the deuce your own gait—you'll get nothing more from me!"

"I did what I could—it's a mighty blind trail," muttered Sleepy George, through a mouthful of meat.

"Blind or not blind, I want you to find out who he is, if he has any motive in coming here, other than looking for gold. You can manage it well enough, if you are smart. You must manage it, or—well, you know the one who wants your place."

"The Preacher—but he's fuller'n a tick all the time."

"He will drop that, if I only promise him—never mind what," hastily added Long Tom, catching a quick sparkle in the man's eyes. "I tell you now, you must wake up. If nothing else will do it, just think of the way in which he disgraced you that day—and he only a boy!"

The bruised and discolored countenance of Sleepy George turned a deeper purple at these words, as he growled:

"Only for you I'd a' wiped all that out afore I ever shet an eye ag'in. But I wasn't much wuss than somebody else as I could p'int out. You kin hear *crawfish* wherever you walk."

"It was the sight of his face—one I never expected to see this side of the grave. You should know whether it was cowardice, old man. As for the rest—let them run their

length. As for talking, they are prudent enough in my hearing, since that little affair with Windy Joe."

What more might have passed between the two worthies can only be conjectured. A peculiar voice attracted their attention.

Mary Morton had left the room for some reason, and while she was absent a man entered unnoticed. Fate destined him to play a certain part in the history of Hard Luck not soon forgotten by at least two of the characters of this story, and for this reason, if none other, a brief description will not come amiss.

Tall and slender, yet giving evidence of considerable muscular power, joined to the lithe activity of a panther, a glance at his erect, supple figure would give one an idea of a young man in the prime of life. Yet his hair was white as the newly-fallen snow, tangled and matted though it was. A heavy beard of like color fell upon his breast. His face was wrinkled and seamed, his eyes deep sunken, his lips thin and colorless. His skin, despite the fact of his being hatless, was not tanned. Of a peculiar ashen tint, it resembled that of one risen from the grave. A death's head upon a living body!

His garments were a mass of rags and tatters, pieced here and there with a bit of skin or fur, yet revealing his skin in more than one place. He bore no weapons, a fact in itself sufficient to create a sensation in that place, at that time.

Entering the room with a step soft and noiseless as that of a cat, he glanced quickly around upon the different parties, his cold, sunken eye resting upon the broadcloth-covered back of Long Tom. No one paid him any particular attention. Their dinner was of more interest than Crazy Billy—the name by which the ragged wanderer had been dubbed.

He stood for a brief spell in silence, then glided to the wall and began marking upon it with some soft black substance. Swift, steady and true were his fingers and sight. There were no random movements. Each stroke, even with such rude material, betrayed the artist. And shortly the rapid touches began to develop into a picture of peculiar interest—if nothing else, strongly characteristic of those lawless times.

A man, wrapped in a cloak, yet with his face fully revealed, was stealing up behind another man. A long knife was drawn back for the treacherous death-blow.

Beside this was another scene. A body lying upon the ground. Two men arresting a third, upon whose face was a look of horror; in his hand he held a knife. Pointing toward him as though denouncing a murderer, stood the cloaked figure, a look of devilish malice upon his face.

It was at this point that the shrill, peculiar voice of Zimri Coon broke the silence and called the attention of all toward the strange artist.

"A travelin' show, by hokus! Now's yer chance, boys, fer to git your pictures tuk fer to give you sweetesses. Brace up an' look your slickest!"

"There's one likeness, at any rate!" muttered the little man in gray, who had warned Little Volcano to beware of Long Tom. "Look at the man with the cloak."

Quietly as the words had been spoken, they were audible to all, and as if by one accord, every eye save that of the artist was turned toward the table at which Long Tom and Sleepy George sat. The former, who had turned his head at Coon's speech, flushed hotly, then turned ghastly pale, as though he, too, had recognized the likeness.

The features of the cloaked man were those of his own—and everybody in the room recognized the fact.

A few more rapid strokes, then the crazy artist drew aside as if the better to inspect his handiwork.

A third picture stood beside the others.

Two men standing upon a scaffold, one hooded and bound, the other placing a noose around the doomed man's neck. The executioner's face was that of Long Tom.

With a furious curse, that worthy sprung up and toward the mad artist, drawing a revolver, but before he could cock it, old Zimri Coon leaped between the two, with ready pistol, sternly saying:

"Back, thar! Dar' to burn powder hyar, an' I'll fill ye so full of holes your mother wouldn't know ye from a sieve! A critter like you to draw on a pore crazy devil—an' he ornared at that. Git out! ye cowardly scum o' perdition—'f I was so ge-flickered mean as that, I'd go sell myself to the fust Chinook squaw I could find, fer to make dog soup of—I would so!"

"Out of the way—I've no quarrel with you," grated Long Tom, trembling with rage. "Stand aside or I'll kill you like a dog!"

"Don't lay in your boots, honey—no, it don't," chuckled Coon. "I've got the drop on ye, an' the fust move you make, down ye go. I've a good mind to waste a bullet, anyhow—an' would, on'y I hain't busted your bank yit. That's all 'at saves ye, purty. Thank the Lord ye was born a gambler, an' he let ye cheat honest miners enough to set up a fare bank, fer on'y fer that ye'd be a good bit on your road to the

land o' brimstone an' tormentation—you hear me?"

"Put up your tools, Long Tom," said the little man in gray. "This gentleman is right; the poor devil is crazy, and of course you know there's nothing but idle fancy in those pictures."

"I know it's all a lie, but one doesn't like to be insulted, for all that," muttered the gambler, as he slowly replaced his weapon. "The crazy fool should be taken care of, and not suffered to run around loose—"

"He will be taken care of," interrupted the little man, with a pointed emphasis. "I've had my eye on him for some time, and you should know what that means."

Long Tom seemed strangely submissive to this man. Nor was he the only reckless desperado those steel-like gray eyes had caused to quail and quietly submit.

During this excited discussion, the crazy artist had stood quiet, gazing upon the angry gambler with a troubled, yet far-away, vacant look. Evidently he did not in the least comprehend his danger. But the quarrel once ended, he turned and glided out of the room as noiselessly as he had entered.

Long Tom stooped and muttered a few quick words in the ear of his comrade. Then, together with the rest of the miners, they left the dining room. Sleepy George caught the gray eye watching him, and strode or rather lounged away in the opposite direction to that taken by the madman.

Talking over the curious event, the crowd adjourned to a saloon opposite, Coon and Long Tom with them. The latter was silent, but listened to the comments of the Hard-Luckians with an evil glitter in his eye.

"Hyar's to ye, old man," said Zimri, looking the gambler full in the face.

Long Tom drank his liquor in silence. Then, wiping his mustache faintly with an embroidered handkerchief, he said, coolly enough:

"Twas your turn over there, friend; mine will come next."

"When it comes, I'll be thar—never fear," laughed the old man. "You'll see me to-night—I'm comin' over to bust your bank—you hear me?"

CHAPTER VII.

JOAQUIN MURIETA.

WITH the snarl, fierce and deadly, of a wild beast leaping upon its prey, Three-Fingered Jack sprang toward Little Volcano. And rapidly yet gently lowering his end of the litter, Little Volcano, nothing loth, prepared to meet his attack. But, sharp and clear as the note of a trumpet, the Mexican's voice interrupted them.

"Hold—back there, Mahuel Garcia—back, I say, or by the Mother of God! I will drain your black heart of its last blood-drop!"

Reckless, blood-loving though he was, Three-Fingered Jack paused, though still sullenly fingering his keen blade. It was hard to deny his lust of vengeance and hatred, yet he well knew the man whose warning he had received. The first sign of disobedience would be instantly punished.

"You don't know him, captain," he said, growlingly, yet in a respectful tone. "You remember how the Scorchers and Mountain Jim were killed? That young devil helped to kill them."

"Peace, Three-Fingers—and mark well what I say—not only you, but every member of our family. This gentleman," he added, placing a hand upon the boy miner's shoulder; "this gentleman is my friend and brother. To-day he saved more than my life. I owe him a debt that I can never repay, though I live as long as yonder tree. I brought him here, that you all might see and remember him. Paint his face in your hearts—and remember that he must be as sacred to your weapons as though he was the veritable son of the Holy Mother. The hand that is raised against him in anger, is raised against me. I swear by all that I hold holy, to hunt to the death any and every person who harms so much as a hair of his head. I swear it—I, JOAQUIN MURIETA!"

Little Volcano started back in surprise. Despite the Mexican's avowal, he could not believe that this man, so handsome, so courteous and gentle, was indeed the notorious pirate of the placers of whom so many sickening tales were told—whose ruthless murders outnumbered the years of his life—the man who was commonly represented as a hideous, blood-drinking giant.

The outlaw noted his start with a faint smile, as he motioned a couple of his men to lift the litter and carry it to the tent of old Juanita, the medicine-woman of the band. Then, signing Little Volcano to follow him, he passed on to a larger tent, pitched apart from the rest. Entering this he bade his guest be seated, placing some food before him with a flask of wine.

"I beg, señor," he added, earnestly; "I beg that you will await me here for a few moments. I am anxious about my wife. As soon as I learn Juanita's verdict, I will return here. There is something I would tell you before we part."

Little Volcano had time for some sober thinking while left alone. He knew enough of the popular sentiment to feel that the sooner he bade adieu to the outlaws, the better for his own

safety. If his presence among them, as the claimed friend of Murieta, should ever become public, the chances were he would be given a short shrift and a long rope, without benefit of either judge or jury.

"Let me once get out, and the devil may take me if they ever catch me here again," was his muttered comment.

He had made quite a hearty meal before Joaquín returned, with a lightened countenance.

"Señor, congratulate me. Juanita tells me that one week's quiet will restore my wife to fair health. I owe you more than I thought. Only for you, she would now be—"

The outlaw's voice trembled, and the brilliancy of his black eye was dimmed with something very like a tear. Little Volcano, though, now he knew what manner of a man his new acquaintance was, could not help feeling a strong interest in him, though at the same time eager to bid such dangerous friends a final adieu.

Murieta must have detected something of this sort in his words or looks, for his face clouded and his eyes drooped for a moment, as if hurt. But then he said:

"Words are too poor for thanks such as mine, señor. This may prove my sincerity plainer. Nay, take it," he added, hastily, as the boy miner hesitated. "You can, without fear. Though there is blood upon the hand that offers it, the secret was won honestly. I alone know of the placer. It is yours now, to make use of as you may see fit."

"But"—hesitated Little Volcano, "if this mine is so rich, why don't you work it yourself, and so—that is—"

"Instead of mining gold by shedding blood, you would say," interposed Joaquín, with a faint smile. "You need not fear to speak bluntly—it would take more than words from you to anger me. And then my skin is not as tender as of old. But let that pass. I am glad you suggested that doubt, since it gives me an excuse for telling you my story—only my wife has heard the truth of it—but somehow I would like you to know me as I was, before they drove me to the devil. Then, when you hear men talk of me, you can say—well, fiendish as he is now, there is some excuse for him."

"Not if the story would pain you—"

"It is almost the only pleasure I have. Pain? There are times, señor, when I am forced to run away by myself, and when alone among the mountains, to repeat my wrongs to the spirits of the air. It would drive me mad else. But there—I am talking wildly."

After a few moments' pause, as though seeking to collect his thoughts, Murieta began his story in a low, subdued tone, growing colder as he proceeded as though he feared to trust his utterance.

"My father was an American—a hunter and trapper. His name was John Merrit, but this became Juan Murieta when he came to live among my mother's people. She was a Sonoran. She saved my father's life one time, and then he married her. Only brother Carlos and I lived to manhood. Father was shot dead by our side at Palo Alto. When the troubles came, he was true to his native country, and his sons fought with him for America. It was with him and among the Americans that I learned what men were. Little of my mother's blood remained in me after that. But father died, and Carlos and I returned to our mother. Twice did I have to fight for my faith in the Americans, when some of my mother's people insulted them."

"Well, I married—she was called Carmela Felix. That was in '48. Then came the gold discovery. Carlos was then at the Mission of San Jose. He wrote me to come quickly—that a fortune awaited the gathering. Carmela and I met him at San Francisco. Brother was in trouble about a grant of land, near which had been discovered plenty of gold. His only witness was then at Hangtown. We left Carmela at the Mission Dolores, and set out upon our journey. At Sacramento we bought fresh horses, and rode to Hangtown. There we found Florez, the witness we needed. I was feeling unwell, and my comrades left me at the house while they took a ride through the mines."

"I heard a loud noise. Stepping to the door, I saw two men dangling from a tree. I could recognize the faces, distorted though they were—my brother Carlos, and his friend Florez."

"The men from whom we bought our horses had followed us and declared that the animals were stolen. That word was enough—besides, the men accused were only greasers."

"That was the first blow."

"I returned home, vowing vengeance, but Carmela persuaded me not. We soon after took up a claim on the Stanislaus river, and were doing well. The claim was very rich, and we were making a fortune rapidly. Though I had not forgotten my brother's murder, my feelings had calmed, and I bore hatred only to the two men who had sworn his life away. Had I ever met either of them my knife would have found a hot sheath in his heart."

"Word of our rich strike spread far and wide. Miners flocked to the spot in scores, taking up claims upon every side of me. But of them all, not one was to be compared with

mine in its yield of gold. And day by day the hard feelings grew. From black and envious looks it passed on to hints, then open threats. They said it was a shame that a cowardly, thieving greaser should have the pick of the valley. I bore it all quietly for my wife's sake, but I would not run away from them."

"The storm broke at last. Twenty armed men came to my cabin one day, and ordered me to leave, swearing that no one of my race should gather gold in their neighborhood. I showed them my papers. They laughed at them. One fellow snatched them from my hand and tore them up. I knocked him down. The rest set upon me in a body. I did what I could. But one man against twenty? I was knocked down and beaten senseless—they thought me dead. As I fell, I heard Carmela scream, and saw her rush forward to shield me from the blows. They seized her—then all was black."

"It was night when I awoke. She was lying beside me, dying. She told me all—you can guess—and died, as I touched her lips. That was the second blow."

"I must have gone crazy. It was months after, that I can first remember. Then I found myself mining at Murphy's Diggings, in Calaveras county. But when my memory returned I had no heart for work. I could only think of my murdered Carmela. A devil in my heart kept urging me to avenge her, blood for blood. I fought against it, but could only drown remembrance in drink. I left my claim and took to gambling. I did this, honestly, to keep from worse. But only when I was drunk would the devil's voice be still. And every man that passed by me, I would catch myself trying to remember whether he was not one of the faces surrounding me on that black day."

"It was in the summer of '50. I had been visiting a friend, who lent me a horse to ride back. As I entered camp, a man yelled out, 'horse-thief!' I was secured. He proved that the animal was really his. I told my story. A party of men rode off to arrest my friend."

"Some of the party holding me captive proposed to hang me, and thus end the matter, right or wrong. Others objected. One—an Englishman—said to flog, then ride me out of camp on a rail. The rest agreed. I was stripped to the skin, and then the Englishman struck me forty-nine lashes. They set me astride a rail and carried me a mile out of camp, warning me that to return would be death."

"That was the third and last blow!"

"That night I procured clothes and arms of a friend. I entered the camp, sought out the man who had flogged me, and stabbed him to the heart. That was my first blow, but not my last. From that day until now—I might say until my death—I lived only for vengeance. And I have had it—yes, I have had it!"

Little Volcano said nothing. He was busy thinking over the sad, tragic tale he had heard. While listening to the man he could not help believing in his truth, and while still abhorring his crimes, felt a strong sympathy for his terrible wrongs.

Joaquín misinterpreted his silence, and arose, proudly, yet with a sorrowful look in his dark eye. The words he was about to speak were suddenly cut short by a rifle-shot, closely followed by a wild shriek of agony.

The body of a human being came toppling down from the rocks above—a loud cheer was heard—a yell of exultation and triumph.

"We are attacked!" cried Murieta. "Flee, señor—fly for your life while there is a chance! If you are seen here with us, nothing can save your life!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ADVENTURES BY THE WAY.

LITTLE VOLCANO hesitated. Upon the hills, not far from the spot from whence dropped the corpse of the surprised sentinel, he could see the active forms of a score or more rough-clad miners, dropping from ledge to ledge, caring little for bruises or falls, thinking only of the enemy below, whose death they had sworn in solemn concert. He saw them, and knew that to be discovered within the outlaws' camp would stamp him as one of their number. It looked cowardly to run, yet he could not stand and fight against the man-hunters. Neither could he—in his present mood—join them against Murieta.

With the hasty warning, Joaquín had turned away, never doubting but it would be heeded. Only a stern resolve to fight hard, to fight to the death in defense of his helpless wife, whom he loved even more tenderly than his first, the murdered Carmela—he had thoughts for nothing else.

Already the dropping fire grew more steady and continuous. The outlaws, quickly recovering from their surprise, flocked to the call of

*This, I believe, is the truest sketch of Joaquín Murieta's life that has yet been published. It was given me by a friend who, in '55-'60, had for a "mate" one of the band that killed Murieta and Three-Fingered Jack. This mate was married to a cousin of the outlaw. From her he received the story, told it to my friend, who, in turn, transmitted it to me.—J. E. B., JR.

Joaquin, fighting desperately, for they knew that defeat meant inevitable death.

This much the boy miner saw, then he turned and picked his way up the valley as rapidly as was consistent with safety. The trail was easy enough. He had only to pass up the valley for a reasonable distance, then leave it by any convenient defile or else by scaling the hills. After that—what? Little Volcano looked a little puzzled. While following Joaquin's lead, he had completely lost his bearings. The lay of the ground was an enigma to him. He had never been in the vicinity before. He had paid little attention to the sun; besides, now it was almost directly above his head.

A few moments' thinking, puzzling over his situation, was enough to convince Little Volcano that he was indeed lost. But this did not give him much uneasiness. He knew that he could not be many miles from Hard Luck, and a view from the top of almost any of the surrounding peaks would set him aright.

Striking into a narrow defile, he glided rapidly along, soon leaving behind him the sounds of fighting. Only a few hours before he would have gladly welcomed the tidings that Joaquin Murieta's race was run, but now—so deep an impression had the outlaw's history made upon him—he caught himself hoping that he at least, with his beautiful wife, would escape unharmed.

"The devil is never so black as they paint him. They make Joaquin out a perfect fiend—a murderer for pure love of bloodshed. Never a word is said of his wrongs. Even suppose he stretched the facts a little, what he must have suffered was enough to make a devil of a saint. I can't blame him much for taking the war-trail—I would have done as much myself."

Possibly Little Volcano would not have admitted as much to any one else, but he really meant what he said to himself. The magic of the outlaw's words had not entirely left him.

Satisfied that he had made a sufficient circuit to carry him clear of the miners, the boy miner veered to the right, hoping thus to strike the trail followed while bearing the litter, feeling sure that, this accomplished, he could easily retrace his steps to the pocket where he had left his tools. He could still hear an occasional far-away shot, and from this fact he judged that the outlaws had taken to the rocks and were still standing at bay.

Suddenly Little Volcano paused, then sprung behind a clump of bushes beside him. Among the mountains, as on the prairie, every prudent man regards a stranger as an enemy until he is proven the contrary.

Parting the leaves Little Volcano peered forth upon the object of his suspicions. Presently the hard look in his eyes softened, and a smile crept over his face.

A man was sitting at the foot of a distorted pine tree. Upon his knees, nursing it with both hands as though it were a baby, he held a capacious leather flask. At brief intervals this was carefully elevated until their lips met in a long, loving kiss, then the lightened vessel would rest again upon his lap, with one horny palm affectionately caressing its polished side.

"Hyar's lookin' to'rds ye, pard," politely quoth the toper, gravely nodding toward his imaginary companion.

"Drink hearty, pard—longer breath and a bigger stomach to ye!" laughed Little Volcano, as he stepped from his covert and advanced toward the man.

"I see ye an' call—show yer hand!" sharply cried the fellow, with flask in one hand and cocked revolver in the other, all traces of drunkenness vanishing as if by magic.

"A bob-tail flush—the pot's yours," replied the boy miner, promptly falling in with his humor. "Easy, pard—don't come down too heavy on a stranger. Tain't white man's law to give a fellow a bullet when he asks for a friendly nip of oh-be-joyful!"

"I didn't know but you was Walk-in, or some o' his tribe, when you fust spoke—but now I see ye, reckon ye don't look very dangerous, a'ter all," grunted the miner, lowering his weapon.

"I know I'm little, but those who tackle me generally find me woolly and hard to carry," retorted the youth.

"Your tongue makes the biggest part o' ye—but squat down. It's mighty pore business, this drinkin' fer both sides. You came 'most too late, but I reckon thar's enough left to ile your inside works."

Little Volcano accepted the invitation, partly because he was thirsty, but mainly with the hope of being set aright as to his present whereabouts by the miner.

"You wasn't 'long o' us?" half asked the man, after a mutual health had been drank.

"I guess not—I don't think we ever met before," replied the boy miner, looking more closely at his new acquaintance, but without greatly increasing his respect for that worthy.

Tall, broad-shouldered and heavy, but loosely built, with large bones and awkward members; a shock of unkempt hair, sunburnt to a mottled hay-color; a beard as frowzy, now dampened with whisky and tobacco-julce; a face, puffy and unwholesome, pimpled and whisky-veined; yes bleared and bloodshot. Add a red flannel

shirt, greasy and torn; trowsers even more dilapidated; cowhide boots full of holes; a belt with knife and two revolvers—all rusty and neglected—and you have the picture of a California bumner.

"I knowed it! I said to myself, soon's I sot peepers on ye—thar's a' onlucky cuss—I did so! You don't know what you're missin'—but mebber tain't too late. Anybody else, I'd never say a word—but, honest, I like your looks. 'Minds me, sorter, of the boy I left to home—my Babby—on the farm. The darnedest, smartest boy you ever see! Why he'd actily steal the aigs from under a broodin' weasel, and wouldn't never faze a ha'r. Mind, 'm talkin' now."

"Never mind that—can you tell me—"

"You bet! I cain't do nothin' else. I knowed you'd jine—I see'd it in your eye! Yes, I did so! You know thar's five thousan' dollars offered—"

"For what?" sharply interrupted Little Volcano, a suspicion of the truth flashing across his mind.

"Fer his head—what else? You see, I've razed a comp'ny—the gayest old outfit you ever saw! We're goin' huntin' this cussed Walk-in. We've got him in a hole. He's ourn, shore. You must jine us—"

"Thank you—not any in mine! But what are you doing here while the rest are—that is, where are they?"

"Young feller," said the drunkard, slowly, "air you a white man—air you honest? Then you've got to jine us. They's no two ways 'bout it. Ef you don't—wal, what kin we think but that you're a fri'nd o' them cutthroats? An' ef we think that, what 'll be the eend? A hemp rope—a necktie party—an' you'll be thar—at the wrong eend o' the rope fer comfort. That's me talkin'!"

"And where would I be, all the time you were doing this?" sharply uttered the boy miner. "From your talk one would think you were—who are you, anyhow?"

"Who air I? When you see men take off thar hats an' speak low like they was afeard the yeth would open and swaller 'em up, then they're talkin' o' me—o' the rarin' waugh-hoss o' Grand river—the squeelin' colt as was never backed—the critter as kin squeel louder, buck higher, jump furdur, kick higher—"

"And run faster than greased lightning when he hears the voice of a man!" sharply interrupted Little Volcano, with a gesture of contempt.

The braggart stared in amaze for a moment, then stepped forward, raising both fists as though he would crush the insolent stripling into the earth. But he, as more than one other had before him, counted without his host. Little Volcano was not fond of being crushed.

He sprung forward, planting his fists fairly upon the braggart's bare throat. Falling heavily backward, the brute lay quivering like a stricken ox.

"There!" muttered the boy miner, as he removed the knife and pistols from his belt and flung them into the hollow. "The next time you run across a little boy, I guess you'll think twice about scaring him so bad!"

Laughing over the astonishment of the "waugh-hoss," when he should recover from the double compliment, Little Volcano strode rapidly on in the course he thought the right one. The encounter put him in a good humor, and before long he remembered the chart given him by Joaquin. To his chagrin, he found the landmarks—or rather the names given them—strange ones to him, though otherwise the directions were easily understood. Doubtless the outlaw had intended giving him full explanations had not the surprise interrupted them.

Again was Little Volcano startled. He heard the sound of pick-strokes close at hand. Knowing how jealous prospectors are of any espial, particularly when successful in "making a strike," he sought cover, then crawled cautiously along until he reached the verge of the ravine where the gold-diggers were at work. Peering stealthily over, he could scarcely suppress a cry at the sight meeting his eyes.

Two rough-looking men were plying their tools like madmen. And cause enough! They had struck a "pocket" of wonderful richness. Upon a handkerchief lay a dozen golden nuggets nearly the size of hens' eggs, and nearly every minute the store was added to.

Little Volcano knew that his very life was in danger. Honest or not, few men would hesitate at crime—even murder—to keep such a secret to themselves, and these lucky ones wore no appearance of being saints. Yet, knowing this, such was the fascination the gold had over him, that the boy miner could not retreat. He gloated over the golden pile as though it were his own. He even made a hasty calculation as to its value. More—he nearly made up his mind to announce himself, and lay claim to a share of the find, as the price of his silence. Almost—but not quite. He was still sensible enough to know that such a course could scarcely end save in bloodshed—in their death or his own.

Then—the bank gave way beneath his weight, and he rolled down into the ravine, to the very feet of the miners!

CHAPTER IX.

SLEEPY GEORGE AND OLD ZIMRI.

STEALING along like an Indian upon the war-trail, with bowed head and careful foot, taking advantage of every bush and boulder, parting the branches and letting them ease back as he passed through, now gliding rapidly forward, now bending down until he lay almost prostrate—a human lizard. His actions were those of a man hunting some suspicious and wary animal that a single false step might alarm and send it off forever beyond his reach.

Hunting he was—but his object was human game.

Before him glided a man, winding and doubling through the broken hills and gulches, yet not like one wandering aimlessly. Steadily he kept on, never once turning his head, evidently all unsuspecting of the danger threatening him. More than once the trailer paused and raised his pistol; but as often was it lowered, undischarged. Possibly he feared for his aim—or maybe he wished to learn the destination of his victim before striking him down.

As though gathering confidence from his victim's abstraction, the man-hunter gradually lessened the distance between them. His dull eyes began to glow, his face to flush more deeply. He had resolved to strike, and immediately.

As though to favor him still further, the foremost man paused at the mouth of a rocky pass, thickly lined with bushes and parasitic plants. Kneeling down and resting his pistol upon a bush, the assassin took a long and deliberate aim at his unconscious victim—his finger pressed the trigger.

"Hellow, pritty—sayin' your prayers?" cried aloud a shrill, peculiar voice, and a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder.

The assassin started—his weapon exploded—with a cry of angry surprise he started back, a look of terror upon his wolfish features.

"Wal, I be durned! You're the fust two-legged human critter I ever see as shot hisself off by a tetch on the shoulder—old man, I congratulate ye—I do so! You're a nat'ral cur'osity. Ef you was on'y mine, I'd make a 'pendent fortune out o' ye, lettin' of ye out fer a self-prambylatin' two-legged howlwtizer down to the forts—they'd pay a big price—"

"Give us a rest, growled the fellow, edging away from the loquacious new-comer. "You ain't got no call to pester me, as I knows or You go your way, an' I'll go mine."

As he spoke, he cast a quick glance toward the defile. He could see nothing but the natural leaves and rocks. His bullet must have sped clear of its mark.

"Thar's where you make a mistake, pard," was the cool reply. "I hev got a call to you—a most powerful one, too. I thought so the first time we ever met—an' when I see you jest now, I was dead sure on it. Thar—" he added, as the man drew himself together as one does who anticipates an assault. "Take it easy. They ain't no call fer you to be ashamed. I'm a perffessor, too—"

"A—what?"

"No—a perffessor—'ligion, ye know. An' when I see'd you thar, kneelin' down to your 'votions, I sais, sais I—thar's the pard fer me. He won't go back on a fri'nd; them as does sich like ain't the ones as need watchin' with all two both o' your eyes to 'vent his cheatin' ye out o' yer boots—he'll play fa'r, you bet! That's whot I said—but I don't know now. 'Pears like it'd be rather dangerous bein' safe when you go off so durned easy—"

During this speech, Sleepy George—for the reader will readily recognize him—was a prey to strongly mingled emotions. Certain that his attempted murder had been discovered, he held himself ready to fight for his life, though he did not relish Zimri Coon for an antagonist. But the old man was so cool, his queer face lighted up with a look of kindly approval while speaking, that the bummer began to believe that he had overlooked the form of the crazy artist entirely. To assure himself, one way or the other, he bluntly interrupted old Zimri:

"Prayin' h—! I was drawin' bead on a head o' game sech as ye won't find easy—an' you, like a blamed fool, spoilt it all!"

"Was it a grizzly?" eagerly cried Coon, fumbling at his rifle. "Was it ol' Eph? which way 'd he go—?"

"No—'twas a buck," shortly replied Sleepy George, brushing the cold drop of perspiration from his brow, and drawing a long breath of relief. "He went through that pass yonder."

"Deer meat's strong, this season, don't you know—poor, too. B'ar meat's better—but it's gone, an' we can't help it. I'm sorry, though—I am, really. Ef I only knowed—"

"Never mind. Mebbe I'll strike another chance. But say—old man—no 'fence if I speak out plain?"

"Atween gentlemen? Not a bit—not a bit, pard."

"Well, it 'pears to me you've growed mighty friendly all to once. You used to look at me like I was a pizen mean purp—"

"Strategy, pard—don't ye see?" chuckled Coon, poking the bummer in the short ribs facetiously. "We war watched—'sh—! never mind speakin' uv names—sech things kin travel on the

air when you don't want 'em to. An' then—I don't mind 'fessin' it—I warn't shore o' you. I thought I'd watch and take my time. I did it—yas, I watched and watched, until now I kin say—Sleepy George! put you 'ban' right thar an' I'll make a 'pendent fortune fer ye—ef I don't, ye kin jest chaw my alabaster year, an' I won't kick nary one't!"

Sleepy George *did* put it there, and the two shook hands like warm friends. The hummer's suspicions had vanished like smoke before a mountain breeze. His huge mouth widened with a cordial grin. And if Zimri Coon was not equally sincere, at least he proved himself a rare actor.

"This 'll be a day you won't soon forget, old man," chuckled Coon. "So far as I could see, you don't 'pear to be suffering very heavy from richness, but afore this week's out, you'll have more slum—but thar! let's wet it, fu'st—nothin' like startin' out right foot fu'st."

"You ain't stuffin' me?" ventured Sleepy George, wiping his lips after a hearty pull at the flask.

"Ef I be, it's with the pure stuff—with lumps o' gold big as a hen's aig—an' beans by the quart. Thar it is—I've found a pocket o' gold sech as was never hearn tell uv afore this. They's enough fer a hundred men, but you 'n' me 'll vide it atween us. They's only one thing—it's in a nasty place to get at; only fer t'at I'd 'a' cleaned it out long afore now. But one feller can't do it alone. Fer two months I've bin lookin' fer a pard. I did think that chap as calls hisself Little Volcano—which hain't his name no more'n it's mine—I did think for a while he would do, but he's too pesky high-toned fer me. Then I struck you—an' now I offers you the chainece. Ef yes, all hunky; ef you've got bigger game on—"

"That's enough!" said Sleepy George, eagerly. "Jest show me my work—no matter what it is nor how dirty. I'd wade through h—l chin deep for a chance at a pocket like that!"

"Tain't so fur off as that—not quite, laughed Zimri.

"Two hours from now 'll take us to it. Ef it's all understood—we're to go even shares, to work fair, an' no tricks—why, we'll go right thar now an' open up work."

It is needless to say that the hummer greedily accepted the offer. If the reader thinks him too credulous, it must be remembered that was the age of wonderful surprises. Nearly every day came reports of miners making strikes of fabulous richness, of "pockets of gold" where one stroke of the miner's pick turned up a fortune.

Together they passed through the defile in which the crazy artist had vanished and strode on through the rugged and broken hills. Coon's tongue rattling volubly, principally concerning his discovery. But a chance remark regarding Little Volcano recalled to Sleepy George the late instructions of Long Tom, and he said:

"You spoke o' countin' on him as your pard, at fu'st. Then I s'pose you watched him like you did me? They's sum folks back thar as sais the feller ain't just what he wants 'em to think. 'Tain't nothin' to me, only—if they's no secret in it, an' you know, mebbe thar's n thin' to hender you t'ellin' who the devil he is, anyhow?"

The studied carelessness with which Sleepy George tried to speak, did not escape the keen-witted old man, but he paid no outward notice to it. Glancing quickly around, pressing one finger upon his lips, he muttered:

"Mind how you speak, pard—they's danger in it—they is, a heap, too! Jest try an' member, now; did you ever chainece to see him when he was plum alone—when they wasn't nobody else 'thin eazy call o' him? No, you never did! 'cause why—he's guarded day an' night. Mebbe you won't see 'em, but they'll be thar, all the same. Let a hand be raised against him, no matter whar he may be, an' afore it could fall, there'd be fifty knives an' pistols a-barin' right on the feller's heart as did it. You jest try it on some time—but not until after we've cleaned out the pocket—an' you'll see I'm tellin' the plain, solid truth. Afore you could wink twicet, they wouldn't be enough o' you left to grease a patchin'! I tell you, pard, them as thinks mischief to that little cuss, 'd better settle up their business afore they tries it on," added Coon, impressively.

"But who is he?" persisted Sleepy George, his eyes aglow.

"I won't speak it out loud—they's no tellin' whar his friends ain't—but gi' me your ear—so. But fu'st—promise you won't ever tell nobody—swear it, honest Injun!"

The hummer complied. Coon put his lips to his ear and whispered in a low tone:

"He's—he's *Queen Victoria in disguise*!"

Sleepy George uttered an oath of disgust. But Zimri said seriously:

"That's the best answer you could git. They's no tellin' what might be the end on it ef you knowed who he really was. They say he's got more'n twenty devils as kerry's him every word anybody speaks about him. Stop a moment. You see that blasted tree, yonder? Wal, right thar is whar we go down to my pocket!"

Forgetting the jest in his avarice, Sleepy George darted forward and soon stood upon the

verge of a deep canyon, or what seemed to be an oblong pit, a hundred feet in depth, with almost perpendicular sides. Coon drew a coil of grapevine from beneath a rock, wound one end around the tree-trunk, then dropped the coil over upon a ledge some twenty feet below.

"Right thar, 'long that shelf, is whar the gold is. 'Ll you go fu'st, or shall I?" asked old Zimri.

For answer Sleepy George grasped the vine and swung himself over the escarpment, quickly reaching the ledge. But instead of following, old Zimri snatched the vine up and flung it far from him, with a mocking laugh.

"Watch the gold fer me until I come, old man!" he cried, then darted swiftly away.

Sleepy George stared in amazement. He could not understand what it all meant. Nor did he have much spare time. A loud *sniff* startled him, and glancing along the ledge he found himself face to face with an enormous grizzly!

CHAPTER X. THE HERMIT.

It was certainly a most disagreeable surprise—not only to Little Volcano, but the two lucky prospectors as well. The brief warning crackling—then a miniature avalanche of earth and stones, carrying with it the sprawling body of Little Volcano, landing him in a heap at the very feet of the astounded miners.

One minute before, even while turning up the precious nuggets of gold with each swiftly succeeding pick-stroke, they had chucklingly congratulated themselves upon being the only living persons with a knowledge of this wonderful bank of nature, and now—! They fell upon the struggling mass at their feet with trembling eagerness. There was blood in their eyes—death in their hands—murder in their hearts. And doubtless murder there would have been committed in order to preserve their golden secret, only for the presence of mind displayed by the boy miner, whose quick wits managed to set his dust-laden tongue in motion.

"Skin out, pard—carry the news to Mary! Tell 'em where you left me; and don't—"

With a fierce, snarling curse, one of the prospectors sprang to his feet, and snatching up his pick, dealt Little Volcano a heavy blow upon the head. Fortunately for this story the weapon was turned in the air by catching upon a pendent twig, partially breaking the force of the blow and causing the side of the pick alone to reach its mark. Yet it seemed enough. The young man lay quivering and senseless, apparently dead, the hot blood flowing from a long cut upon his head.

"Out and look sharp!" snarled the man who had dealt the foul stroke. "Make short work of any chief you see—if he escapes, good-by to our hopes!"

But only the sound of their own hasty footsteps re-echoed through the hills as they dashed here and there, more than once misled by the echoes themselves, until, feeling that all further search was useless, they came together once more, sullen, dogged, baffled.

"We'll make sure of him, anyway," muttered the man who had stricken down Little Volcano. He shall never tell tales, even if his pard does."

"Durned ef I b'lieve they was anybody else—the little cuss was stuffin' of us—that's my idee," said the second, a rougher-looking, ruder personage than his comrade, yet a physiognomist would have pronounced him the nobler brute of the two. "But mind ye, pard—no killin', ef we kin possibly do without it. I won't stan' that. But I reckon you know what I mean."

Little Volcano was just lifting his head feebly from a pool of blood, when the two miners returned to their "pocket." Ere he could make any motion for self-defense, almost before he could realize what had occurred, the miners were upon him, and bound his hands and feet firmly enough with green withes.

Slowly recollection returned. Lying in a painfully-cramped position, Little Volcano could see the two men in whose hands his life or death seemingly lay, earnestly conversing, as he believed over his fate. Only an indistinct buzzing sound came to his ears, but he felt that their talk was of him—of how they could dispose of him with the greatest security to themselves. As his strength returned, the love of life grew stronger, and with a sudden effort, into which he cast all his strength, Little Volcano sought to burst his bonds, but in vain. This did not escape the eyes of his captors, and they turned toward him. Like an inspiration came the resolve to brazen it out, believing that cool audacity would carry him through better than by pleading and promising.

"Of all the dirty tricks, this is the worst!" he cried, acting upon his resolve. "If it's your style of treating friends—"

"It's the way we treat spies," sharply retorted the taller, better educated man of the two.

"The mountains are free to all—unless you've bought the right of way very lately. As for spying, I'm not in that line of business. Even if I were, what have you done—"

"It's not what we've done, but what we've

found," and the man pointed to the pile of golden nuggets lying close beside the captive. "If you hadn't tumbled down here how long would this secret have been ours? Only while you could run to hard Luck and spread the news of our find. But now—well, you can judge whether we will lose our hold upon you very soon."

"Then you've killed him?" cried the boy miner, in a well disguised tone of painful anxiety.

"They ain't no him 'round hyar, 'cept—" began the squat miner, before his more cunning partner could interpose.

"That's enough—I was sure of it," and Little Volcano chuckled with great glee, seemingly.

"I don't believe you had anybody with you—but, if so, he will be too late to save you," growled the tall miner, cocking a pistol.

"That may be. You overhold me this time. You can rub me out easy enough, seeing I am trussed up like a hog. But that will only be the beginning. There will be those upon your trail before another day, who would find you if you turned mole and dug your way into the center of the earth. That much I will say—but no more. Now go on with your rat-killing," said Little Volcano, with unchanged front, though he was far from being as composed as one would think.

The men drew aside for consultation. The lad's confident speech had not been without its effect. Even the tall man hesitated to shed blood that might be so promptly and effectually avenged.

Suddenly a new light filled the boy-miner's eyes. Coming up the valley he espied a human figure. Might it not be a friend? Eagerly he watched his advance. But then the look faded from his face, as he recognized the new-comer for none other than Crazy Billy, the mad artist, the hermit of the hills.

At the sound of his footsteps, the miners turned sharply around. Fate seemed working against them that day. Another witness to be disposed of, or else—what?

Coolly as though he had not seen them, Crazy Billy passed them by, and stooped over the captive, severing his bonds with a knife which he drew from among his rags. But before Little Volcano could arise or draw a weapon, two revolvers covered them.

"We're running this machine, old man," said the tall miner quietly. "You've gone far enough—"

"Easy, stranger," cried the boy-miner, sharply. "Just count up the cost and see if it will pay you. Suppose you should murder us two—and unless you're mighty poor shots, you can do it easy enough. We would be out of your way, sure enough, but that won't be the end of it: I have a pard who would hunt you night and day until he run you down. You would lose both gold and your life. Now listen. I pledge my honor never to speak of your strike here. As for this man—you can see that he is a crazy fellow, who knows nothing of gold."

"But thar's your pard," said the other miner. "He'll not come back without help. He can't get that and return here short of twenty-four hours. Inside of that time you can empty this pocket—or at least carry off all the gold you can spend in a lifetime."

"It's the best we kin do, Wash," muttered the short man. "He means jest what he says—an' thar ain't no other way 'cept by killin'; an' that I won't stan'."

Though with evident reluctance, the tall miner yielded to the force of circumstances, and Little Volcano arose, once more a free man, saved from the death that had seemed inevitable by his coolness and audacity. He took Crazy Billy's hand and shook it warmly. The hermit looked at him with a strangely longing expression upon his deathlike face. "Then he said:

"Come—I have been looking for you a long, weary time. Come—there's work for us, Harry!"

Little Volcano started, amazed. Years had passed since that name had been applied to him. And this strange being—a madman—how could he know? Or was it a mere coincidence? Puzzled and wondering, he followed Crazy Billy's lead, scarce giving a thought to his late captors, whose sullen eyes followed them until the intervening rocks and bushes swallowed them up; then returned to their gold-digging with redoubled energy, eager to make the most of their reprieve, little suspecting how thoroughly Little Volcano had befuddled them.

For a considerable distance the boy miner followed his strange guide in silence, but then curiosity overcame his wonder, and he said:

"Now, old man, if it's all the same to you, before we go any further, I'd like to know where we are bound for—and how did you know my name was Harry?"

Crazy Billy turned and looked his questioner full in the face, then resumed his progress, muttering a few unintelligible words. Little Volcano was silenced but not satisfied. He secretly resolved to find out the truth before he turned back, and then contented himself with following Crazy Bill in silence.

The trail was a long and winding one. Though the sun shone out clear enough now, the boy

miner was completely at a loss so far as his present whereabouts was concerned.

An hour later the hermit paused upon a narrow shelf of rock and glanced keenly around him in every direction. As though satisfied, he signed for Little Volcano to follow him, and lifting a mass of vines he entered a cave. The boy miner followed, finding himself in utter darkness—but only for a moment. Strange sounds met his ear. From every side there suddenly appeared strange, luminous lights, ever in pairs, and a peculiar odor came to his nostrils. He knew that he was in a den of wild beasts, and instinctively he felt for a weapon. At that moment the cavern was lighted up by a lamp of unusual brilliancy, held by the hands of Crazy Billy.

In silent wonder the boy miner gazed around him. Upon every side of him crouched snarling animals, showing their gleaming fangs. Panthers, bears—even one mammoth grizzly—wolves; smaller and less harmful animals. Snakes glided here and there, now hissing venomously, now sounding a shrill, whirring rattle; owls blinked from their perches above. Toads and frogs croaked from the further corner, where stood a pool of slimy water.

And—strangest of all—Crazy Billy stood with eyes riveted upon a wide canvas, stretched upon two poles. Upon this canvas, only on a larger scale, were the same drawings which had so startled Long Tom at the hotel. The hermit's face was working horribly—he seemed like one being slowly choked. Strange sounds came from his throat. The animals aroused began to growl and snarl louder—particularly one huge, sleek panther, who was straining hard at its chain.

A shrill, but husky, choking cry burst from the hermit's lips—the lamp fell from his hands, as he sunk writhing to the floor. The beasts yelled madly and rattled their chains. A sharp, jingling sound—and by the light of the fallen lamp Little Volcano saw the panther spring forward. Weighed down by its spring, he gave one wild scream—then all was blank!

CHAPTER XI.

SLEEPY GEORGE IS AWAKENED.

JUST at that moment Sleepy George would have sold out cheap—had a purchaser presented himself. Upon a narrow ledge of rock with a perpendicular wall upon one side that could not be scaled without assistance; a sheer descent of a hundred feet on the other, with ragged spurs of rock and dark, frost-roughened boulders lying in readiness to welcome him to his death; and before him the big-jointed, shaggy-coated grizzly bear, its little yellow eyes beginning to glow and redden, its flabby lips to draw back and uncover those white teeth, large and strong enough to crack the bones of a buffalo, while the long, disagreeable claws rattled against the rocky ledge, as though sharpening themselves for work—while he, only armed with a knife and pistol, unable to fly, to retreat, yet feeling morally certain that his death must follow a collision upon that narrow list—truly, his situation was any thing but agreeable.

The grizzly clumsily rose upright, waving its fore-paws in eccentric circles as though burlesquing the guard of some fistic champion, and—as Sleepy George afterward solemnly affirmed, when fighting his battles o'er again—with a broad grin upon his hairy face roguishly winked its dexter eye at the corraled bummer.

Sleepy George was not wholly a coward—though, when cornered, a craven often proves himself a dangerous antagonist; and as he saw that the beast "meant business," he drew a revolver and cocked it, at the same time shuffling back a few steps. The sharp click seemed to enrage the grizzly. At last, with a deep, rumbling growl, it waddled forward, jaws and fore-arms opened wide.

Sleepy George fired twice in rapid succession. A wild snarling yell told that the brute was hard hit—then, as it plunged forward to close with him, the bummer's despair-born courage failed him. Dropping the smoking revolver, Sleepy George turned and scrambled along the narrow ledge, hoping to find some refuge, if only a point so narrow that the huge beast could not pass it.

The point was found—but to his horror Sleepy George saw that his own progress was effectually barred. The ledge ended in that direction with a narrow curve of crumbling, frost-eaten rock; it would have given way beneath the weight of a squirrel, much less a man.

At that moment the clear, whip-like report of a rifle smote his ear, followed by a scrambling noise—then a heavy, lifeless thud, coming from far below him. And before he could realize what had occurred, a well-known voice called out:

"Bully fer you, old pard! You done it up fust class, I tell ye! Just take it easy fer a minnit; I'll come and lend you a boost soon's I peel this varmint."

Sleepy George peered tremblingly over the ledge. At the bottom of the canyon, he saw the form of Zimri Coon, rapidly reloading his rifle; and beside him lay the body of the grizzly bear. It was a puzzle to him—the more so as he saw

the old man lay aside his rifle and draw a knife to skin the bear. Surely Coon had led him into this trap, then abandoned him to his fate meaning that he should die—else why had he snatched away the grape-vine, thus cutting off all retreat.

And then, as the fear of death slowly lessened, a longing for revenge took its place, and Sleepy George caught himself fingering his pistol, and as through a mist of blood saw the form of the old man lying beside the dead bear, as lifeless and motionless as it. Yet, as he sought to steady his weapon, his hand trembled like those of a man with the ague, and he lowered the pistol, but not quick enough to escape the attention of Coon.

"Easy, thar, pard!" he cried, sharply, glancing upward. "The bar is dead enough, as you mought see ef you only open your eyes. I pulled on it—an' never yet did I have to send two bullets at the same mark. You hear me!"

Sleepy George knew what these words meant, and the knowledge that he was afraid to risk the shot, only increased the bitter hatred which he now felt for the old man. Sullenly enough he waited, yet with each passing minute repeating a bitter black oath to pay his debt, though years and years should pass over his head before the chance came.

Zimri Coon finished his skinning the grizzly, then called to Sleepy George, bidding him return to the blasted tree and await his coming, and with the pelt upon his shoulder he disappeared up the canyon. The Bummer obeyed, because there was nothing better for him to do, but hardly daring to hope that Coon would keep his word. His fears were soon dissipated. The sound of footsteps echoed overhead, and then a coil of grape-vine fell at his feet. Grasping this, Sleepy George, aided from above by his strange partner, soon found himself landed safely upon the hillside.

"Thar—ef I do say et as hadn't ort—that was jest the slickest bit o' work I've see'd for a coon's age," complacently remarked Zimri, displaying the huge skin with a low, oily chuckle.

"You knowed he was thar all the time," muttered Sleepy George, half in doubt, an evil glare in his bleared eye.

"Sure! you don't think I'd waste so much time on a chaine, do ye? Not much! that ain't my sort. I trapped that varmint near a week sence. I tuk it to its hole, and I couldn't draw it nohow, 'less I'd a' follered him inside—which mought 'a' bin onhealthy. So I jest blasted off a bit o' rock—the point whar you stopped—an' left 'im thar ontel he should get hungry enough to come out for my bait—"

"You tuck me fer the bait, I s'pose," interrupted the bummer, with a sickly grin.

"Yas—I knowed he'd smell you soon's ye got down thar," grinned Coon, glancing at the greasy, strong-scented garments of the bummer. "Old man, you'd make a pendent fortune a-hirin' out as bait—you would so! They ain't nothin' as could resist ye—from a Chinook squaw down to a hop-toad. But thar—don't git your back up 'count of a little joke—I don't reckon it'd be fun fer either on us to quarrel. You know what I told ye. I want a pardner in the richest old strike a-sever was hearn tell on—but that pardner must be a man clean through. I picked you out, as I said, but it's my rule to prove everythin' fust. This is the way I proved you. You stood it like a little man—"

"I won't forget it none too soon—you be sure o' that," slowly uttered Sleepy George, picking at the ground with his long knife. "I've got the best memory you ever saw."

"It was a close rub—I didn't think the blamed varmint would let himself be drawed so easy, or I'd 'a' waited fer him up hyar. I was 'most too late—but a inch of a miss—"

A chorus of horrible yells and screeches interrupted Zimri. The yelling of a panther, the roaring growls of bears, were mingled with shriller yells—and blended with them were the sounds of a human voice, raised in mortal agony or deadly fear.

"They's deviltry goin' on thar—foller me ef you've got a speck o' man in ye!" grated Zimri, catching up his rifle and darting along the hillside in the direction from whence proceeded the frightful sounds.

He was just in time to see a mass of vines part, and the form of a human being stagger out and fall to the ground like one dead. Brief as was the glance, Coon recognized the person, and with a hoarse, angry cry he sprang to his side. It was the body of Little Volcano, as he suspected.

Seemingly from the heart of the mountain came the wild chorus, now lulling, only to burst forth anew with redoubled fury—as though the fiends of Tartarus were serenading their king and master.

"Save him—save him, for God's sake!" gasped the boy miner, as he felt human hands tenderly lifting him from the ground. "Save him—they will tear him to pieces!"

Zimri Coon carried Little Volcano to some little distance before speaking. Then, seeing that no pursuit was made, he paused and forced a little whisky down the boy miner's throat. The remedy was effectual. Gasping for breath, he lifted his head, staring around with a puzzled

look. But then, as memory returned, he arose, feeling for a weapon, and said:

"Quick—old man—come! The wild beasts are loose and he will be killed! Hurry—!"

"Who—" began Coon, but Little Volcano paused for no questions, running back toward the cave, and the old man could only follow, bewildered, yet ready for work.

The wild yells had died away. Instead came a low, mournful sound, as of some one moaning in sore distress.

Little Volcano raised the leafy screen, then paused, as a gasping moan came to his ears. Zimri followed, and his eyes dilated with amazement at the weird tableau lying before him.

Close to the still burning lamp lay the form of Crazy Billy, the hermit. Beside him crouched a lithe panther, its paws resting upon his breast, and—strange sight!—licking his face with its long, moist tongue, the while uttering a low, mournful whine.

That the hermit was not dead was proved as they stared. One arm moved and wound itself around the panther's neck. And then, ceasing its mourning, the animal lowered its head upon the hermit's breast, purring loudly, as though grateful for this little action.

"Come," said Coon, dropping the screen. "We can't do nothin' here, even ef we tried. That painter would be at our throats the fust touch we gave its master—an' it'd go hard with me to kill the critter, a'ter that!"

"He must have been in a fit," muttered Little Volcano, retreating with reluctance, though knowing that the words of Coon were naught but truth.

"He is gittin' over it, though—you saw him move his arm. Mebbe he'll come out pritty soon, ef we wait. Anyhow, they ain't no hurry, an' while we're waitin', jist tell a feller how you've made out prospectin', an' how you came in thar."

Nothing could be seen of Sleepy George, and believing he had fled from the spot in terror, old Zimri gave him no further thought.

Little Volcano obeyed; briefly narrating his ill-fortune in gold-seeking, then detailing more at length the events of that day. Silently, yet with strong interest, Zimri listened to the lad's encounter with Joaquin Murieta and his wife—the story the outlaw had told—the attack and all that had followed since.

"You was lucky to get off so easy," at length remarked Coon, thoughtfully. "But, lad, pray the Lord nobody ever finds out Joaquin called an' treated you like a fri'nd. It'd be your death. They's a storm a-brewin' fast as'll bu'st over this land an' sweep him an' his and everybody as is sp'icioned to ever had anythin' to do with him, down to never-come-back-ag'in—jest as sure as cats ain't dogs. But let that go. You said they couldn't none on 'em seen ye clost enough to know ye ag'in. Then that paper—le's have a squint at it, anyhow."

Little Volcano produced the chart given him by Joaquin, and Zimri pored over it in silence while he told what the outlaw had said of its wonderful richness. To his great delight, Coon declared that he knew the landmarks mentioned—that he could easily find the spot—

He abruptly paused, then darted nimbly into the bushes. He saw a man lying as if asleep, indeed, snoring loudly!

Sleepy George seemed true to his name.

But even he could not sleep beneath such a storm of kicks and curses as he now received.

"You pizen cuss! Git up an' waddle—puck-achee—skin out o' this afore I git mad an' chaw ye to nothin'. A-listenin' thar like a snake—git—you git!"

In vain did the bummer protest that he had heard nothing—that he had been sound asleep. The lie was too barefaced. For one minute Zimri felt strongly tempted to put a bullet through his brain, and thus end all danger, and had Sleepy George made the faintest show of resistance, that he would assuredly have done. But the bummer slunk away like a whipped cur, nor turned until beyond view, then the venom of his evil heart burst forth in a horrible, blasphemous oath of revenge.

CHAPTER XII.

COUNTING AND FIGHTING.

THE Sabbath sun looked down upon the classic town of Hard Luck—and it was a Sabbath day long to be remembered by the natives. The redoubtable Walking John, who had promised his up-country friend, Tanglefoot, a gay specimen of metropolitan enterprise on the "day of rest," audibly expressed his disgust.

"Durn the contrary luck! sich another quiet day was never knowed in these parts—an' jest beca'se a feller's lookin' fer some fun—it's too dratted bad!"

Hard Luck was unwontedly quiet, even for a week day—while for Sunday—that eagerly-welcomed day of nothing to do but drink and gamble, roister and fight, when ye gentle miner spreads himself in a manner wonderful to behold—that calm Sabbath day might be likened to the quietness of the tomb. True, occasionally arose the familiar yell of some drunken digger, and twice word was spread of a fight—but they proved to be nothing more elevated

than a paltry rough-and-tumble between fellows too drunk even to pull hair scientifically.

And so, with a foreboding sigh, Walking John murmured his fear that Hard Luck was going to get religion.

The quiet was not unlike that which often precedes a startling convulsion of nature. There seemed to be a storm brewing. Men gathered in little knots, conversing in low, stern tones. It might have been noted that these men were nearly all of them of the more reputable citizens, as the world went in Hard Luck. Many an anxious glance was cast toward these groups, and more than one "tough case" privately determined to make a moonlight flitting without waiting the chance of being warned—or worse.

Long Tom emerged from his door, dressed in his finest suit of broadcloth, with glossy beaver and highly-polished boots; his daintily-embroidered shirt-front lightened up by gleaming diamond studs and pin—"fixed up like he was goin' courtin'," as one rough digger laughed to another—in an aside, though, for Long Tom was only too well known as being "on the shoot, from the word git up," for any common man to venture a liberty with him.

Yet the ironical remark hit the bull's-eye of truth. Long Tom, the gentleman gambler of Hard Luck, was bound upon a mission of love—as he would have construed it. For weeks past—ever since the day when Billy Breeze piloted the "Wide Awake" down the "Devil's Chute" without brakes, Long Tom had been making up his mind to a bold game—holding, as he believed, winning cards in his own hand—or sleeve. At first it was only a sentiment of pique—but this, day by day, gave place to what, in him, might be called love. Undoubtedly he was sincere enough and he meant to treat her well—to turn over a new leaf—when he won her.

It was with a strange tremor that he entered the Miner's Rest—strange in a man who was noted for his iron nerves and icy self-control. Yet Long Tom caught himself fairly trembling as he caught sight of Mary Morton seated in the little "office," writing. But with a muttered curse on his folly, the gambler quietly addressed her, with the politeness he had ever shown her, after that unlucky move when Little Volcano so sharply rebuked his insolence.

Mary replied, not without a faint flush. Young as she was, she was yet old enough to have noticed Long Tom's respectful admiration; and though she would have laughed at the idea of his ever becoming her lover, it was pleasing to her vanity, this distant homage from the handsomest, best-dressed man in town—gambler though he was.

As he noted her confusion, Long Tom grew more composed, and carefully followed out the programme he had formed in his own mind. After a few commonplaces, he began:

"Miss Mary, I want to have a sober talk with you. Will you take a walk with me?"

"Indeed, I never go out, Mr.—" and she hesitated, just on the point of adding his *sobriquet*.

"I hardly dared expect it," he added, easily. "And yet I did hope you would have enough confidence in me to comply. However, it matters little. What I have to say can be spoken here just as well."

"I do not know what you can have to say to me," murmured Mary, her cheek flushing still deeper. "I am very busy—I have the accounts to make up—"

"There is another day coming—and this is not work fit for you. You were meant for something better—"

"It suits me—I have no wish for anything better," a little sharply.

"But others may for you," he added, quietly. "And that brings me back to my business. Miss Mary, you have lived here long enough to know what I am—a gambler; but for all that I claim to be a gentleman, in business and out of business. I run no 'brace game.' I give every man a fair chance for his money. But let that pass."

"I am a man; and being such, I have a man's feelings and hopes. You must have seen how matters have been going with me lately. You must know that I love you—"

"Stop!" cried Mary, turning pale. "This must not go any further—I must not listen—"

"Pardon—but you must listen. I have a right to say that, as every man has who loves from his heart. You must listen to me some time—why not now as well as to-morrow, or next day—or a year from now; I said that I love you—so I do. I will wait, if you ask me—only you must hear me first."

"It will be of no use—why not spare us both this useless pain?" faltered the maiden; but Long Tom, like many another gambler, would hope against hope.

"If it is useless, then the ill-luck is mine; but many a fortune has been lost because the player was too faint-hearted to play his hand out. Let me have my say—then will come your turn. You may have heard men talk of my being rich; though they were right, they little knew the truth of what they said. I am rich—I can count my thousands up in the hundreds. It is

all yours, if you say so. Only—with it I beg you to take me."

"Sir," said Mary, rising to her feet, her face pale and cold. "I warned you that words were useless in this case. You persisted. You have spoken plainly. So will I. You say you are rich. I do not ask how that wealth was obtained. I don't suppose you yourself can tell how many souls that gold has cost. But let that pass, as you said. As for your offer, I can only refuse it—stop! Let me finish, once for all. Though you could turn yonder mountain into gold and lay it at my feet, I would refuse it. From this you can judge how little chance there is of my ever loving you—"

"Take care!" muttered Long Tom, the devil showing in his eyes. "Don't drive me too far—"

"You can only blame yourself. Think of our first meeting—an insult—if you have forgotten it, I have not."

"I was mad—"

"Just as you are now. Take my answer once for all, and never think of my changing it—"

"Change it you shall—and that, too, before we part this day," grated Long Tom, his eyes glowing. "I have yet a card to play—one I hoped you would not force me to show. Do you think I am ignorant of your object in coming here? Shall I tell you—"

"Sir, you have said too much already. Leave me now—or shall I call for help?"

"It would not be healthy for those who come," and Long Tom laughed softly. "I'm afraid there would be matter lying around for at least one funeral. Call, if you will, and I will tell them what you refuse to hear—"

The sentence was abruptly ended. A dusky face suddenly arose before that of the gambler, silently as a ghost. But never ghost yet wore that sleepy, innocent smile—even if a ghost was partial to almond eyes and dangling pig-tail, not to speak of a faint smoky smell, the peculiar inheritance of all Celestials.

"Missee tellee you go—Chough Lee tellee you lun, *dam klick!*" murmured the Celestial, still smiling.

Long Tom uttered a fierce curse and raised his clenched fist, but the intended blow did not fall. The muzzle of a gold-mounted pistol stared him full in the face. He thrust his hand into his bosom—but the pistol was gone. By what magic Chough Lee had conjured it from its close resting-place, he never knew; enough that it now threatened his life.

Just how the matter would have ended, can only be surmised, for, at that moment, a man breathlessly entered the room, crying:

"You're wanted, boss! That's the deuce to pay at the house! Little Cassino's rubbed out, an' Yazoo, he's knocked higher'n a kite—hurry—thar's the devil to pay!"

Long Tom darted out at the door and raced toward his gambling-house. Sunday was his great harvest day, and this was the first time he had ever left its management to his men alone.

He could hear the sound of pistol-shots, mingled with wild yells and crashing of furniture. And then he saw a big man leap bodily through the front window, carrying sash and all with him, brandishing a revolver in each hand, and yelling like a maniac.

"Whoo-ee! cl'ar the track an' let a man spread hisself! Hyar I stan', little Wolverine, a babby in britches—whar's the old man as wants to spank me fer cuttin' up Jack? Who'll squat on me to keep my b'iler from bu'stin'—loose the breechin' or the hull rig goes to 'tarnal smash! I kin blow a harrycane, spit a river, cough up thunder, melt a chunk o' ice 'th one squint—an' not hafe try! I pick my teeth with streaks o' lightnin', comb my ha'r with a pine tree, an' when I blow my nose it rains cannon-balls—whoo-ee!"

"And when you get a little whisky in, you make a cursed fool of yourself, Bill Jackson!" cried a sharp voice, as a small man dressed in gray pushed through the crowd and confronted the blustering giant.

Wolverine stared in amaze at the bold speaker, scarce crediting his ears. But the little man came still closer, and though he bore no visible weapon, he acted like one already master of the situation.

"Let up on that, old man," he added, as the man was about to resume his tirade. "I haven't time for fooling. You've run your rope to an end—"

"Who'll take me? Who's the man—"

"I'm the man, you drunken bloat!" screamed the little man, leaping forward and closing with the giant, before he could use his weapons. "You've run too long—right here you come to a stop!"

For a moment there was a fierce struggle, then both fell to the ground. But almost instantly the little man arose, while Wolverine lay with handcuffs on.

It was at this juncture that Long Tom came up, and the little man glided up beside him, saying, softly:

"I was just coming after you, Long Tom—you're wanted."

With a fierce curse the gambler wrested himself free.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DEED OF DARING.

"HANDS off!" snarled Long Tom, springing back and drawing a long, slender dagger from his bosom.

"Don't make a fool of yourself now," sharply cried the other, making no motion toward drawing a weapon. "One would think you were running a race with the hangman."

"I have no business with you. There's room enough for us both—you keep to your own trail and I will to mine. You have been watching me close, of late—I have seen it. Just take a friend's advice and hunt up some other business—it's not a healthy game you're trying to play."

"If you haven't been drinking more than usual this morning, your wits are turning sour, Long Tom," laughed the little man in gray, good-humoredly. "A game I may be playing, but not exactly against you. Still, if I were, you would have to brag pretty heavily before you bluffed Jack Hayes."

Long Tom slowly replaced his weapon, and stood looking at the man with curiously-mingled feelings. This, then, was the lately-appointed sheriff, concerning whose deeds of daring and wonderful exploits, many tongues had been busy ever since the troubles in Texas. His life as a Texas ranger and Indian-fighter, no less than his life among the lawless of the mines, was familiar to nearly every Californian. The pride and reliance of honest men, the terror and scourge of criminals who were forced to admire even while they hated and feared him—such was Jack Hayes.

"Drop it, boys," cried Hayes, laughingly, as the diggers crowded eagerly around him with outstretched hands. "You'll have time enough to get acquainted with me before we say good-by. Just now there's work to be done. First—some of you fellows take that Wolverine and stow him away where we can find him when he's wanted. They say he's rubbed out Little Cassino and Yazoo—not much loss, unless it is to our friend Long Tom, but it's time we put a stop to these musses—they have given Hard Luck a name that can be smelt for fifty miles. We'll rig up a court of justice, and give the whole outfit a chance. But now—there's to be a meeting to be held at the Dew-Drop Inn. Some of you are wanted there—some are not. I'm going to stand at the door. Those whom I know clear through will pass me—all others will stay out. If any of these last feel themselves insulted, all they need do is to say as much, and after the show is over, I'll do my best to accommodate them. But they must wait. Any attempt to kick up a row while I'm engineering the machine, will be followed by a funeral, *sure!* That's all I've got to say."

This pointed speech was applauded to the echo. And probably no other man could have carried the matter through without there being more or less fault-finding if not something worse. But Hayes stood at the door of the Dew-Drop Inn—the principal saloon of Hard Luck—and either admitted or refused such men as he chose, without any dispute or disturbance, saying, laughingly:

"I don't doubt but you're all square men, friends; but when I hain't known a man long enough to answer for him as I would for my brother, I've got to say no; so don't grow impatient, and your turn will come next time."

When some thirty were admitted, the doors were closed, and Jack Hayes seated himself upon the well-worn pine counter, and prepared for business.

"Gentlemen," he began, producing a couple of papers, "I have here my commission as sheriff, together with another authorizing me to raise a company of armed and mounted men for the purpose of bringing to justice one Joaquin Murieta and his followers, who are well known as outlaws, thieves and murderers. There is no need of my wasting time in detailing their crimes. It would take a month of Sundays for that. You all know that they have done enough to deserve death a thousand times over. And yet they run over the country as though they were the lords of creation, and we lower than the dirt beneath their feet. It is a burning shame—and I, for one, can never hold up my head as a man, until this disgrace is wiped out. In order to do this, I have called this meeting."

"In a few minutes I will call for volunteers, but remember I reserve the right to reject any or all whom I consider unfit for the work before us. By this I mean unsuited for the rough life we will have to lead, as those who can be employed better elsewhere. The pay will be one hundred dollars per month. Each man will furnish his own horse and weapons, but for any loss sustained in actual service will be repaid. A reward of five thousand dollars is offered for the head of Joaquin, three thousand for that of Three-Fingered Jack, and five hundred for each member of his band, provided their connection can be proved."

"And now, gentlemen, before we go any further, my friend here—Jack Gabriel—has a word or two to say to you."

A tall, broad-shouldered, heavily-bearded man, dressed in a flannel shirt and jean trousers half-

hidden inside heavy cowhide boots, limped forward, and was helped upon the counter by Hayes.

"Gentlemen," began Gabriel, brushing back a tangled shock of sandy hair, "I'm a plain, ignorant cuss, just from the canebrakes o' old Arkansas. I hain't got the gift o' gab like the boss hyar—I kin read a trail better than a book, but I guess you can onderstand what I'm going to say."

"I reckon you've hearn tell of our little skrimmage with Joaquin's gang t'other day. A blue-bellied Yankee tuck a fool notion he'd rake in that five thousan'. He got up a gang—I was one. We run the varmints to airth—I kin show ye the place whar they uses. But when we got 'ithin smellin' distance, Yank he tuk sick to the stomach, an' wanted to crawfish. We jest kicked the cuss into a ditch, an' pitched in fer keeps. It's a nasty word—but we got licked clean out'n our boots. They was two to our one, an' they fit good—that much I will say. I got this cut—it runs from hip to knee—from Three-Fingers. Then Joaquin came at me, an' I hed to run; but not afore I told 'em I'd come and see 'em ag'in. An' so I will, even ef I go alone. Arkansas Jack never yit told a lie to a enemy. That's all I've got to say."

"It's enough, boy Jack. We'll give you some salve for your cut before many days. The ball is moving now, and we won't let it stop until Joaquin and his gang of cutthroats is nothing more than a memory. Now, gentlemen, we will open the list. Form in a circle around those two tables, and come up one by one. Remember what I told you before. Some will be rejected, but not because they are other than true, trusted men. But I explained that before. Now, then, Jack Gabriel, you come first."

One by one the men approached the counter, being closely questioned by Hayes, and if accepted was sworn in and their names put upon the list. Long Tom was the first one rejected, and from that on stood sullenly by, a sour look upon his handsome face.

The list was completed at last, and after cautioning each man to keep a close tongue in his head, and to hold himself in readiness to take the field at a minute's warning, Hayes requested them to join him in a bumper to the success of the Man-Hunters—after which the meeting was adjourned and the doors thrown open. Then Hayes fastened upon the door-post a printed notice, bearing the words:

"\$5,000 REWARD!"

followed by a full description of Joaquin Murietta, and signed by the Governor of California.

Directly afterward Hayes proceeded to investigate the affray at Long Tom's gambling-house, in which one dealer had been killed outright, and another terribly pounded by Wolverine. Though the evidence was confused, enough was shown to prove that the gamblers, taking advantage of their master's absence, and the drunken condition of the miner, had put up a "brace game" on Wolverine, who had detected the foul play and terribly avenged it.

"Gentlemen," said Hayes, addressing the crowd; "as we haven't got a regular court here yet, our proceedings may be a little informal, but we'll try to keep on the right side, while doing justice to all. Little Cassino has gone where we have no jurisdiction. Yazoo has also got a lesson—still, as we must be square, even in gambling, I move that he be invited to choose some other location, as soon as he is able to travel, with a hint that it will be very unhealthy for him to return before Gabriel blows his horn. As for Wolverine—"

"They run a 'brace game' on me, boss—three thousan' dollars' worth—ain't that enough for oncot?" muttered the prisoner.

"You shall have every cent of it back," interrupted Long Tom. "I don't make my money in that way. Sheriff, as this man was robbed in my house, by men in my employ, during my absence, I request that he be set free without penalty."

"That's no more than I expected you would say, friend. But wait a moment. Now, Wolverine, be honest, would you have went in quite so heavy if you hadn't been drunk?"

"'Twas the whisky, boss—'twas the whisky," said the miner. "I don't reckon I knowed what I was doin'—"

"Then the whisky must be punished for kicking up such a row. Shut up—I'm running this outfit—and my sentence is that the prisoner must go and hold his head under the pump while some one plays on the pump-handle until even the smell of whisky is drowned."

This sentence was hailed with cheers, and knowing that any resistance would only increase his punishment, Wolverine submitted with as good grace as might have been expected.

Among the spectators of the ducking was a horseman with gray hair and beard, ragged and dirty, seemingly decrepit and feeble. No one noticed him in the excitement of the moment, but his eyes roved quickly over the crowd, resting longest on the face of Hayes.

When Wolverine was half drowned Hayes bade them let him loose, and then removed his handcuffs. While this was going on the ragged horseman passed on to the saloon, and in a fee-

ble tone called for some liquor. While drinking it he read the notice posted before him without the change of a muscle. Paying for the liquor, he took out a pencil and scribbled a line beneath the signature, then drove a knife deep into the pine through the paper, at the same time uttering, in a loud tone:

"I AM JOAQUIN! TAKE ME WHO CAN!"*

Tearing off false hair and beard, he thundered down the street, firing shot after shot into the yelling crowd behind. Instant pursuit was made, led by Jack Hayes.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE."

"PLEASE manage your dinner so as to remain in the room after the rest have gone—I will explain then."

The boy miner's cheek flushed hotly, and a vivid light filled his blue eyes as he passed on, reaching his accustomed seat more through instinct than reason. The whole room and its occupants seemed to be dancing a dizzy reel, and it was only when Chough Lee placed his dinner before him that he recovered himself, and could remember just what had occurred.

He had entered the dining-room, as customary, stopping to hand Mary Morton gold for his dinner. While she was making change she whispered the order recorded above, then turned hastily aside to wait upon another customer.

During the greater portion of the time since his first arrival at Hard Luck, Little Volcano had been kept too busy for indulging in day-dreams, though he had never forgotten the fair maiden whom he had so luckily been able to assist; and, almost unconsciously to himself, the impression Mary Morton then made upon him deepened and strengthened with each day, until 'twould require but a very slight impulse to send him over head and ears in love. Thus it was, when he received that softly-whispered invitation, that he attached, perhaps, a more serious meaning to it than the girl intended.

Since the day Zimri Coon had used Sleepy George as "grizzly bear bait," and afterward caught him—as he firmly believed—listening to them from ambush while Little Volcano was telling the story of the outlaw placer, and sent him off with a flea in his ear, there had been a good deal of strategy going on. Returning to Hard Luck, by Coon's advice, the boy miner publicly announced that he had lost a written paper, offering two hundred dollars reward for its recovery. This was to throw Sleepy George off the trail, in case he had heard their comments on the placer, and to give it color, as well as to make sure that the bumster should not slip off to have a search for the placer on his own account, the partners never both left the town at the same time. Little Volcano was one of the spectators to the bold exploit of Joaquin that Sunday, and perhaps he was the only one who did not fire a shot or start in pursuit of the daring outlaw; despite the intense excitement, this fact was noticed and afterward commented upon. More than one evil, suspicious glance was given the boy miner, but he went his way unconscious of them—a fairer subject filled his mind.

One by one the diners finished their meal and dropped out, only a few of the more self-possessed daring to give more than a respectful glance at the fair doorkeeper; and those who did address her received no encouragement to pause for a chat. Mary was but little more at ease than the boy miner, nor did this agitation lessen as the last miner took his departure, leaving the young couple the sole occupants of the room.

With far more courage than it would have required for him to march up to the muzzle of a loaded pistol in an enemy's hand, Little Volcano arose and approached the tiny office, where, blushing deeply, with downcast eyes, Mary awaited him.

"You wished to speak with me, Miss Morton?"

Not as the words are printed here did he speak them—rather, each one came out like drawing a tooth; but they answered the purpose by setting Mary more at ease, and breaking the ice.

"I did. You must have thought it strange of me—to speak to you in that way, but there was no other course open to me. I looked for you yesterday, but you did not come. I was writing a note when you came in, and would have sent it to you by Chough Lee. But perhaps I can tell you better as it is. Your life is in danger—"

"That is nothing very terrible," laughed Little Volcano, as Mary faltered. "So it has been nearly every day these three years back. Yet I thank you very much for taking even the slightest interest—"

"You and your friend, Mr. Coon, risked your lives for a perfect stranger—is not that a sufficient excuse?" softly uttered the maiden. "You have never given me a chance to thank you for that, but, believe me, I am grateful—"

* A fact. The words he wrote upon the placard were, "I will give ten thousand!" to which he signed his name.

"I would do a thousand times as much just for one kind word—" impetuously began the boy miner, but, as if his ardor frightened her, Mary resumed the almost forgotten subject.

"Please listen to me—and believe what I say, even if I cannot tell you just how I came by the knowledge. Your life is in great danger. It is rumored that you have possession of a paper giving full directions how to find an enormously rich placer of gold—though you pretend it is lost. Some men—I only know the name of one, that ugly man known as Sleepy George—have resolved to win your secret, even if they have to murder you for it. They are dogging you night and day, hoping to learn where you keep the paper. But they are growing impatient, and have resolved to kill you and take the chances of finding it."

"I half suspected as much," said Little Volcano, with a light laugh. "We have been watching Sleepy George pretty closely for the last week, and the chances are that he will run into a hornet's nest the first time he shows his hand. But that does not lessen my debt to you—the idea of your taking so much trouble on my account—it almost makes me ashamed of myself—and yet I would rather have your interest and good-will than all the gold in California!"

"You have more than earned it—only for you that day—"

"God bless the chance—or providence—that led me along that road!" earnestly uttered Little Volcano, venturing to touch the little paw that rested upon the rail before him. "On that day it seems to me my life really began. Until then I was only a careless, aimless boy—younger in most things than even my years. But since—please do not take your hand away," he pleaded, as Mary moved back confused, if not alarmed by his earnest tones. "I will not hurt it, and—and it feels so nice."

A silly enough speech, at which both laughed; but it answered the purpose. The tender little paw rested quietly in his, even when the boy miner ventured to press it still closer.

"Most people take me for a little boy, though I am older than my looks; I am past twenty. Old enough, Mary, to know a true woman when I see her, and old enough to—to—"

Mary did not offer to supply the right word as he faltered and broke completely down, though the odds are she could have done so. Neither did she seek to avoid it. Though her head drooped, and her hand trembled and grew warmer, this did not frighten our hero. On the contrary, it assured him that she would not be very angry, even were he to speak still plainer.

"Mary," he continued, desperately, "I knew that I would make a fool of myself before I ended, but I can't help it. I am a clumsy, awkward fellow—I can't say anything just as I would wish, and whenever I speak to you, it seems as though my mouth was full of hot mush. I try to say something, and it chokes me so I can't speak. But I will—if it kills me!" and he drew a long breath.

Mary lifted her head and shot one quick, shy glance up into his face. Little Volcano started as though he had been shot. Whatever it may have been that he read in her eyes, we have no means of knowing, but sure it is that that glance effectually loosened his tongue.

"Mary, I love you—love you more than words can tell! Say that you do not hate me—that you will try to love me!"

She did say so—not in words. Only a little sob broke from her lips, and her head drooped upon his breast. There was an oak railing between them, but Little Volcano never thought of that. Her head was upon his breast, his arms were wound tightly around her form, his lips were pressed to hers. That was all he knew.

Sitting cross-legged upon one of the dining-tables, a sleepy smile upon his yellow face, going through the pantomime of clapping his hands in noiseless delight, the sole spectator of this little tableau—was the Celestial, Chough Lee. And possibly he might be sitting there unto this day enjoying the love-scene, had not his pantomime went so far as to overbalance him, and the noise made by his clattering wooden-soled shoes upon the floor as he rolled from the table, awakened the young couple from their brief dream of love.

"Remember—for my sake, be cautious," murmured Mary, then slipped away from the boy miner's arms and quickly disappeared.

Little Volcano remained watching the doorway through which she had vanished, until a low, oily chuckle aroused him, to find the little Celestial beside him, a benevolent grin upon his flat countenance, otherwise as expressionless as a piece of highly-smoked dough.

"Now, John," said Little Volcano, in a slow, distinct tone, at the same time placing a little bag of dust in Chough Lee's hand, "you have been sleeping all this time—and what you dreamed you had better forget. If you talk, I'll cut off your pigtail, and then you'll never see China-heaven."

"Chough Lee savey—*llu bet!*" gracefully replied the Celestial.

Little Volcano lingered around the hotel for a while, in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of Mary, then strode away and up the hills.

He wanted to be alone—to recall each word and look of his charmer—to realize the blissful truth that she was his and his alone, by her own confession. And lying beneath the huge redwood, with the fragrant azaleas around him, he dreamed away the rest of the day, little recking of all the plotting and scheming going on in the town below, of which he was the center—and as little suspecting what a crushing blow was even then awaiting him. Though the sky seemed all light and joy, peaceful and happy, a cloud was creeping up, growing larger and spreading wider until it should envelop and swallow him up—and he dreamed on.

Night came, and he hastened down to supper. Mary was there, but only a quick glance could they interchange, in that rough crowd. Dallying with his food, the boy miner waited for the boarders to disperse, but before that occurred, he saw Mary leave the room and Mrs. Champion take her place. Nor did Mary return, though he waited until the last. Down-hearted, he was forced to depart—going, though ignorantly, to his fate. Strolling aimlessly along, he soon found himself beside the spring which served to furnish the Miner's Rest with water. Not feeling in the mood for society, even that of Zimri Coon, Little Volcano stretched himself upon the soft grass beside the murmuring waters.

How long he lay there, he never knew. The sound of voices aroused him. Glancing up, he saw, partially in the shadow, partly in the moonlight, two figures—a man and a woman. God! what a bitter pang pierced his heart as he recognized Mary Morton, her hands upon the man's shoulder, his arm wound around her lithe waist! He lay like one in a trance. He strove to arise—to cry out; but in vain. A superior will held him there, helpless as a babe, to be tortured as only they can be who love with all their soul; to see the tall man stoop and press his lips upon the fair, upturned face—to see the caress returned—to catch the indistinct sounds of low, loving words. All this he saw—and then, like a madman, he sprang erect, uttering a hoarse, inarticulate cry, as he darted forward, revolver in hand.

But there was no one to confront him. Like a vision of night the figures faded away, leaving no trace behind—leaving him alone in his mad despair.

CHAPTER XV.

A NIGHT WITH THE TIGER.

THERE was murder in the boy miner's heart as he sprang toward the couple who had so rudely shattered his brief dream of love. There was no room for doubt. Night though it was, the nearly full moon shone down upon the scene with sufficient brilliancy to reveal that lithe, graceful form—so lately reclining upon his breast—now yielding to the caresses of another. Her face was cast into the light; he knew that it was none other than Mary Morton. The second figure he did note so distinctly, since a broad-brimmed felt hat cast his face into the shadow; he saw a tall, well-built figure—nothing more.

At his cry they vanished like magic, nor could he find trace of either as he madly rushed to and fro. Had he been less excited, the case might have been different: but when the thought of intercepting Mary by watching the house struck him, it was too late.

Then the reaction came. Stunned, dazed, stupefied by his terrible awakening, Little Volcano groped his way to the rude cabin where he and Zimri Coon made their headquarters. The old man started to his feet as the boy miner entered, and for a moment he feared the worst as the young man sunk upon the bunk.

"Gi' me a drink—quick—I'm choking!" said Little Volcano, in a hoarse, strained voice, then eagerly clutching the proffered flask of whisky, he drained its contents at one gulp.

Old Zimri stared in open-mouthed amazement. Never since their acquaintance began had he known the boy miner to do more than moisten his lips with liquor, until now.

"Never you mind, old boy," cried Little Volcano, tossing the empty flask aside, with a disagreeable laugh. "Every dog must have its day, and this is mine. You've only seen me in my Sunday-school dress—but if you follow my lead to-night, maybe you'll find out why they gave me my nickname. I'm on it, to-night, bigger'n a wolf!"

Coon could not help seeing that something strange had occurred to thus excite his young friend, but pretended not to notice it, save by falling in with his humor, the better to get control of him. But little Volcano—on whom the heavy draught of liquor had produced no other effect than to make his eyes brighter and his voice sharper and his wits the keener—laughed again.

"That's played, old man. I'm no blessed baby—nor are you my nurse. I've played good boy long enough; now I'm going to give the devil a benefit or bust something. You can come along, too, if you feel like having some fun. We'll take in Long Tom's first—"

"Think better on it, boy—do, now," earnestly entreated Zimri. "You ain't well—I kin

see it in your eyes. Just lay down and take a snooze—"

"Drop it, old man—you might as well save your breath. I know the whole story—that there are a dozen fellows likely to be there who'd like nothing better than to stick a bit o' steel under my hump ribs—and I feel just like giving 'em the chance, too. But—there. I make you my heir—stow that bit of paper away some place—then come on."

Zimri Coon carefully secured the precious chart in his bosom, then followed Little Volcano in silence, realizing how vain would be any further words. He felt a premonition of coming evil. He knew that the boy miner had made many enemies, and felt sure that, in his present condition, he would only too surely give them the opening they watched for. He had learned to love the boy, brief as had been their acquaintance, and now he followed him, doggedly enough, but with a quiet determination to keep at his elbow through thick and thin—to guard him with his own life, if need be.

Long Tom's gambling rooms were free to all. There were no closed doors, no vigilant porters, no secret passwords. Everybody gambled in those days. A professional gambler was regarded as a respectable member of society, unless he was detected in some foul play—running a brace game of faro, or the like.

There was little attempt at "putting on style" at Long Tom's. The building was composed of rough slabs, forming one large square room fitted up with two faro lay-outs, one table for monte, another occupied by a roulette wheel, while the center of the room afforded room for several tables sacred to the votaries of poker. Each table was furnished with decanters of whisky, from which those who chose helped themselves without charge. The only attempt at ornament visible was a large wooden chandelier, suspended from the ceiling in the center of the room, supporting a dozen oil lamps. This was a light and really beautiful piece of carving—the work of a grateful bummer whom Long Tom had picked from the gutter and set upon his legs again.

Little Volcano entered and glanced around the room. Long Tom in person was dealing at one of the faro tables, and toward this one the boy miner strode. Pouring out a full glass of liquor he swallowed it, then slipped into a vacant seat. The dealer's face changed not, but a quick glitter in his cold eye told that he had marked the new-comers.

Sleepy George also noticed them, and his eyes filled with a dull glow meaning evil to the two friends. He muttered a few words to a young man, who soon after glided through the crowd, whispering some short instructions to five or six fellows. No one seemed to notice these movements; those who were not playing having eyes only for the game of others.

The gathering around the table where Long Tom was dealing soon doubled that of any other. And close beside Little Volcano and Zimri Coon were the men who seemed to be acting under Sleepy George's orders. If Long Tom divined what was going on his stony face gave no evidence of it. His entire attention seemed given to his dealing.

The boy miner had a fair knowledge of the game and its rules, and played boldly, though in good judgment. The liquor he drank appeared only to steady his nerves and cool the fever in his blood. Zimri chuckled silently as he saw this, and saw that instead of growing excited and drunken, each glass of liquor only seemed to increase the lad's judgment and "luck." Stake after stake was won, each succeeding one of larger amount, until a huge pile of red and blue chips lay before the young gambler. The majority of the miners dropped out of the game, finding excitement enough in the scene alone. Still three or four kept betting, though in small amounts. One of these—the young man first spoken to by Sleepy George—followed Little Volcano's lead, betting as he bet, and his reasons for doing so soon became apparent.

For several turns there was no bet decided. Then the queen turned up against the bank. Upon this card Little Volcano had placed a stack of red chips. To these Long Tom added the amount won, when, before Little Volcano could touch them, they were drawn in by the young man already spoken of.

"One moment, if you please, dealer," quietly spoke the boy miner. "There is a little mistake here to rectify."

"I have seen no mistake," coldly replied Long Tom, slipping a card from his case. "I pay each bet as I lose, or rake down those I win. Do you accuse me of cheating?"

"No, sir; so far as I know you deal a perfectly square game. I was alluding to a gentleman on my right, who mistook my bet on the queen for his, and drew down the stake to which I alone am entitled."

"If you mean me, young fellow," sharply interposed the gambler, "just let me tell you you're trying your dodges on the wrong man. The bet on the queen was mine—as I can prove by the crowd."

"Very well; I'll leave it to them. Gentlemen, will you decide? Did he or I place those

chips upon the queen?" said Little Volcano, controlling his anger with a strong effort.

"You did."

"Laughing Dick did!"

The different answers were given by a dozen voices, and for a few minutes the matter bade fair to break up in a general row as each party clenched their assertions with sounding oaths. But the prompt action of Long Tom quelled the storm, as he had done many another. Standing up on his chair, a cocked revolver in either hand, he cried out in a sharp, clear voice:

"Order, gentlemen—order! I am running this outfit, and intend to run it decently just as long as I can pull trigger or hold a tooth-pick. If there is any dispute go outside and settle it like gentlemen should—but I'll not have any pulling hair or scratching faces in here."

"If Mr. Laughing Dick is agreeable, I'll step outside and argue the matter with him," coolly said Little Volcano, as he pushed his checks over to be cashed.

But evidently this wasn't just what Sleepy George was after. He pulled Laughing Dick aside, and when the boy miner passed to the door, the gambler was *non est*.

The miners who had sided with Little Volcano set up a wild yell at this, and nothing would do but they must go back and celebrate the bloodless victory of their little bantam in a drink of whisky. Zimri Coon in vain tried to draw Little Volcano away with him.

"No—that dog in yonder lied to me. He knew well enough the bet was mine. I'm going to bust his bank, or leave what I won. You can go home—"

"Not 'thout you, little 'un," quietly interrupted Coon. "I said I'd see you through, an' so I will."

Returning to his seat, Little Volcano recommenced his game, and if he played heavily before he doubled the stakes now. Even the steel-like nerves of Long Tom, veteran gambler as he was, seemed a little unstrung as bet after bet was won by the boy miner. Only he and one other was playing—a bushy-bearded man in a long cloak, who also bet with a cool nerve. At first the game ran steadily in Little Volcano's favor; then it began to fluctuate. Zimri privately whispered to his partner that he suspected foul play, but if so, it was so adroitly managed that even his keen, well-trained eyes could not detect it.

It was the last turn of the cards. Little Volcano placed his stake upon the nine spot. At the same time a bag of dust was dropped upon the tray. The card was drawn—the nine won. And, as before, a hand forestalled Little Volcano. But it remained upon the pile. Quick as a flash, a bowie-knife was driven through flesh and bone, sinking deep into the table, and Sleepy George gave a howl of mingled pain and anger.

Two knives were leveled at the young man's back. Zimri warded off one blow. The cloak-ed stranger knocked the second assassin down, but as he fell he tore off the bushy beard, revealing a dark, handsome face, only too well known to many present.

"Joaquin—Joaquin! Shoot him—kill him!" With a shrill laugh, the outlaw flung his chair at the chandelier, instantly destroying the lights. Little Volcano sprang up, only to sink back again, stricken down by a foul blow from behind.

CHAPTER XVI.

ZIMRI COON'S PHILOSOPHY.

"LORD! what's the use? Not a dog-gone bit! Ef a feller's lucky, he'll git jest so high—then he'll come to a greasy spot which 'll make 'im slip clean down ag'in; or ef he holds on tight, some onluckier cuss at the bottom 'll grup his coat-tails an' haul 'im down to his own level—or bust somethin'. Ef luck comes an' squats right down in a feller's lap, ten to one he'll git mad 'cause she don't pay out fast enough, an', like a pesky durn fool, he'll keep foolin' round ontel he turns her bottom side up, or she gits mad an' gives 'im the dirty shake, kickin' the blamed fool funder down than he ever was afore—easy, boy—kinder easy, thar!"

"Thar's a case in point. Take the boy. He gits on a bust. He goes to buckin' ag'in' faro. That's all right. I do it myself onct in a while, or oftener. But he—sech luck! 'Twas like his dealin' jest to suit hisself. That was whar the luck come in—plum, fust-class stud-hoss luck! Then was the fuss, which giv' him a good excuse to draw out, some thousan's ahead. Ef he'd quit then—but no—back he goes ag'in, an' what comes on it? Jest pizen bad luck—nothin' shorter. He gits knocked on the head, loses every durn cent, an' would 'a' lost more, only I manigded to drag 'im out an' tote him here on my shoulders—got a dig in the hump, too—stings like—"

A faint moan came from the lips of Little Volcano, and the old man's soliloquy ceased as he bent anxiously over his patient. As he said, the boy miner had received a severe blow upon the head, with some blunt instrument, during the confusion which followed Joaquin's bold action. It was plain that Sleepy George's friends had done their best to carry out his plans. The lad's shirt pocket was gone—torn or cut off, and

with it his note-book, in which the thief probably hoped to find the chart. At the expense of a flesh-wound, Zimri Coon had carried his senseless friend out from the struggling crowd and over the hill to a secure covert, expecting search would be made as soon as the thieves found out their mistake.

Little Volcano sat up and stared around him. In the faint light of the moon he did not at first recognize Coon.

"Praise the Lord! little 'un—'tain't as bad as I begun to think. You skeered me—yas, I was bad skeered, an' I don't shame to own it. You lay so like a stuck hog—"

"My head hurts," muttered Little Volcano, wincing, as his hand touched the bleeding wound.

"That's most gen'ally the case when a feller gets the hull gable end knocked off o' him. You got a pizen nasty clout—it sorter glanced, or you'd bin cold meat afore now. They ain't no bones broke, I'm pritty sure. You'll be all right in the mornin', less 'tis fer a headache. Take off your han'kerchief—so. 'Tain't the fust broken pate I've hed the doctorin' of. They ain't no water here—whisky's too skearce—so I cain't wash you up mighty nice. But then I don't reckon you want to go courtin'—eh? did I hurt ye, little 'un?" he asked, as Little Volcano winced.

"No—tell me all about it."

But he did hurt—not the wound upon the head. Those chance words brought back all the black despair and bitter pain of the past evening, until, young and full of life as he was, the boy miner asked himself whether it would not have been better had he died where he fell beneath that treacherous stroke.

"They mean business, chuck up," added Zimri. "That's why I brung you here 'stead o' takin' you to the shanty. Ef we 'spect to ever git any good out o' this bit o' paper, we hain't got no time to fool 'round here. Things is gittin' kinder onhealthy. That Sleepy George—durned fool me that I didn't let the grizzly chaw 'im up! He must 'a' hearn the hull yarn, an' he's bin tellin' a part on it to suit hisself. They's bin right smart talk 'bout you an' Joaquin's gang; they'll be more a'ter this night—fer he tuck your part thar. 'Pears to me like we'd better be lookin' up some other stampin'-ground."

"I've done nothing wrong—I'll not snake away from their suspicions as though I were a criminal," muttered Little Volcano.

"No more would I—ef they gits up on thar ear, why we'll jest wade in an' clean out the hull dog-gone outfit—we will so! But—though we kin do it, easy—s'pose we wait a bit fust. Let's go try fer this pile o' gold. I'm clean busted—an' I hedn't time to rake in your pile afore I puckached—"

"Anything—anything. I'll do just as you advise," interrupted Little Volcano, wearily.

"Then the fust thing is for you to lay down an' take a snooze. I'll go back to the shanty an' git some things we caint well do without. Don't you stir ontel you hear me comin'. You won't try to play no tricks on a feller?"

"Never fear, old fellow. When I go back there, I'll take you along to see fair play. There are several persons in town I am in debt to—and when I pay up, somebody's going to have a benefit, sure as you're a foot high!"

Renewing his caution, Zimri Coon noiselessly glided away, promising soon to return. But his absence was a good deal longer than he anticipated. Hard Luck was all afoot, lights flashing here and there, men rushing in every direction. The disturbance at Long Tom's had culminated in a free fight; pistols and knives were freely used—two men being killed and a dozen more injured. Added to this the cry that Joaquin was in town quickly spread. The members of the vigilance committee—or Man-Hunters, as they may justly be termed—were called together by Sheriff Hayes, and hot search was made for the bold outlaw. As might have been expected this was fruitless. Murieta had long since left the town, and was then miles away safe upon the back of his noble black.

From the hillside Zimri Coon saw all this, and it was an hour before he ventured down to his cabin. Once there five minutes sufficed, and, bearing a light pick, shovel and couple of pans, he made the best of his way back to where he had left Little Volcano. He found the boy miner awake, brooding over what had occurred. And then, yearning for sympathy, Little Volcano told his old friend the whole truth.

"I knowed it!" muttered Zimri, disgustedly. "I said so from that fust day—when I fust sot eyes on you too, I sais, sais I—'Thar's the little 'un's everlastin' happiness er his 'tarnal pizen!' I did so! But I knowed what young blood was, an' so I held my hush. I knowed you wouldn't listen to reason then; I knowed it, 'case I've bin thar myself! You needn't grin, little 'un. I'm a tough old dornick now, but the time was when I was as young an' soople an' piert an' fit fer to bu'st a young female gal's heart clean to flinders es you be—I was so! But I got my eyes opened—got laid out flatter'n a feller tryin' to tickle a mule's gable end with a jimson burr? 'Twas Meely Smith—'Squire Smith's da'ter. He was the ace o' trumps, ye

might say, in our part; better off then the rest o' us, an' put on more style—they did. But Meely—I got stuck on her bad! She soon found it out—was mighty friendly when we was alone together. I used to go fer her lips wuss'n a bar up a honey tree—an' she stood it like a little man, too. That used to set me red-hot—an' didn't I tease her fer to name the day when we could git hitched! She al'ays brung up the old squire as a excuse—he was too high-toned fer the likes o' me to get his da'ter easy. Final'y she 'sented to 'lope with me—as she called it—but she said we must use strategy. I sca'cey knowed what that meant, but I was so dead gone, I 'lowed whatever she said must be right, so she fixed it all up. I was to dress up as old aunt Sally—a nigger woman they used to own. An' durned ef I didn't do it, too! I put on the duds, blacked up an' all. I was to call at the house fer her, so's to help kerry her bun'les. She met me. The things was in the house, she said; all folks was to bed, so thar wouldn't be no danger. I follered her in; she left me in the dark fer a minnit. Then she come back with a light. Fust thar was a snicker, then thar was a yell an' a haw-haw! The room was chuck full o' wimmen an' gals, all a-snortin'—an' Meely was the wust tickled o' the bunch. I puckached. Went right through the winder. Didn't stop to say good-by, nuther.

"That was my fust an' last 'tempt at courtin'. Wimmen is mighty good things—I don't say nothin' ag'in'st 'em. Ef 'twasn't fer them, I don't reckon thar'd be many folks a-livin' now. An' sence they're here somebody's got to marry 'em. I s'pose. But this is my idee. Thar's a heap o' fellers in the shape o' men as is so pesky mean an' 'tarnal no-a'count that ef they was run through a rollin'-mill an' spread out fer manure, not even a cuckle-burr or jimson-weed would grow 'thin a mile o' the place. Them's jist the kind as is fit fer j'inin' to the wimmen. That's what natur' 'tended 'em fer."

How much further the cynical Zimri would have gone, can only be surmised, for he found that Little Volcano had dropped asleep, and so he relapsed into silence lest he should disturb the lad's repose. But by the first break of dawn they were up and away. Only pausing once to eat a mouthful of cold corn-bread and bacon, they kept on through the day, heading for the gold placer. Little Volcano seemed more like himself, though at times he would sink into gloomy fits, from which it took all Zimri's powers of talking to arouse him. And so the first day and night passed away.

They went into camp, near the middle of the afternoon, intending to travel the rest of the way by night, lest some curious eyes should divine their purpose.

"It'll be safest that way," said Coon. "We'll be missed from our shanty, an' they'll 'spect we've g'in 'em the slip fer the placer. Ef so, they'll try to head us off. Ef I know the place rightly, once let us git thar an' it'd take right smart huntin' to smell us out."

The day passed and evening descended. Little Volcano was sleeping. Old Zimri was smoking his pipe beside the smoldering fire. All at once his head was lifted, his nostrils dilated, his eyes roving swiftly around. A faint sound had come to his ear, and though it was not repeated, he felt almost certain it was a foot-fall.

Gently cocking his rifle, he listened and watched. No further sound came, but his gaze soon became riveted in one direction. From among the many shadows, he singled out one particular one, that seemed to be—ha! It was moving, and coming directly toward them!

CHAPTER XVII.

LONG TOM SHOWS HIS HAND.

It was the morning after the row at Long Tom's gambling hell. Hard Luck was still bustling, though gradually subsiding into its usual week-day lethargy. Occasionally a mud-bespattered horseman would pace into town; one of the searchers for Joaquin, who had spent his animal's power in an eager, reckless search, if an aimless, ill-guided one.

Long Tom sat alone in his "sanctum"—a small room partitioned off from the card-room. There was an ugly look upon his pale face as he sat beneath the yellow rays of the burning lamp, suspended above his head. More nearly resembling a cell than a chamber—this retreat of the gambler's. There were no windows, no doors, save one small square trap-door at one end. The walls were lined heavily with rock; the ceiling of sheet-iron, doubled. Upon the walls hung nearly a dozen revolvers, as many bowie-knives, together with enough other weapons to give it the appearance of a small armory. Why all this array? The solution lay in yonder square metal chest—Long Tom's bank. Within that comparatively small compass lay ensconced a fortune—wrung from the hearts of husbandless wives and fatherless children, whose eyes might grow dim with watching, hearts sick with uttering never answered prayers—watching and praying for the loved one whose dear face they were fated to see never again this side of the grave. How many joyous plans—how many beautiful air-castles—how many broken oaths and forgotten pledges could those

bits of gold have recalled were they only permitted to speak.

Of the rusty-bearded miner, who would give his "paras" one more "benefit" ere he struck for Frisco to sail for home; of many another who had hopes just as bright. And now? A bit of worm-eaten board beside the gold-bearing stream; a name rudely scratched upon a huge, moss-grown boulder; a wayside cross of bark-covered limbs, marking where the despairing suicides rest. An old comrade may give a thought, a few words of remembrance as he passes by the grave of his dead pard—but who thinks of the dear ones so far away! Most assuredly not he whose hand has wrought all this—Long Tom "played a square game," and there is no weight resting upon his heart—connected with those unfortunates, at least.

A trouble there is—though of the present. There is an evil look upon the gambler's face—a devil working in his heart. Few would care to call him handsome now. Alone, the mask is dropped, nor is the revelation a pleasant one.

A rapid series of knocks were heard upon the floor of the gambling hall. Long Tom replied, bidding them enter. The little trap-door was lifted, and Sleepy George appeared, bearing one hand in a sling. Behind him came five other men, prominent among them being the tall young man who had claimed Little Volcano's stake—Laughing Dick. Little and graceful in build, there was a rakish, devil-may-care air about him, and, despite the marks of dissipation, he would be considered handsome, almost anywhere. His golden locks, curling upon his shoulders, a heavy blonde mustache, drooping over a small, arched and red-lipped mouth; large blue eyes, though slightly reddened—a careless but graceful dress; Laughing Dick was the *beau ideal* of a mountain dandy.

"The Preacher" was there; tall, slender, with a noble head; but the "trail of the serpent" marred all; a piteous wreck of what might have been a shining light.

The other four—including Sleepy George—were rough, scoundrelly-looking reprobates; the scum of the mines—just such willing tools as may be found around all gambling hells—the coyotes of Pasteboard land.

"Spit it out—though your sweet mug has told it all plain enough," snarled Long Tom, refilling his glass.

"They've gone," growled Sleepy George, wiping his lips with a longing look toward the whisky decanter. "We watched close—didn't see nor hear nothin' ontel day; then we went in. They've left everythin' jest as it lay. I reckon they've tuck to the hills 'long o' Joaquin."

"I'd give ten thousand dollars to know that they had—and then I'd spend ten times as much but what I'd have the satisfaction of seeing them hung!" hissed the gambler, his eyes glowing like those of a cat in the dark.

"F'you'd only let us stick him, as we wanted—"

"Drop that! Don't remind me of what a fool I have been—don't speak of that again unless you want to sup brimstone!" snarled Long Tom, with a bitter curse. "What is past is past. We've only got to deal with the present."

"Maybe it's past, but 'tain't forgotten by a jugful," grinned Sleepy George, holding up his maimed hand. "Thar's only one medicine as kin cure this little love token—an' that is washin' it in that young devil's heart's blood!"

"The day you do that, Sleepy George, will put five hundred dollars in your pocket," said Long Tom, with intensity.

"I'll do it with pleasure for half the price," put in Laughing Dick, with the air of one who meant all he said.

"You shall have a try—that's just what I called you together this morning for. I've done a power of thinking since closing, last night. I think I can trust every one of you. But let me tell you one thing. Just so long as you serve me faithfully, I will do the square thing by you; but at the first crooked step, I swear by my mother's soul I will rub you out though it costs me a hanging the next minute. That's business. I tell you now, so you can count the cost beforehand."

"Have we ever acted in such a manner as to deserve these threats, Long Tom?" coldly demanded the Preacher.

"A caution, not a threat—no; you have acted on the square so far. But it has all been legitimate business. I paid you well for it, and as you ran no danger, there was no temptation for you to go back on me. But now—'twill be different. The job I have in hand would be called by an ugly name; I leave you to guess what it may be. But that's enough—until we see whether you all agree to do my work for the reward I am ready to give. If you don't like it, skint out while you may—but don't ever come hanging around me afterwards."

"We are ready to do what we can—I think I can speak for the other gentlemen, as for myself," said the Preacher, glancing toward his comrades.

"I was sure of you, pard," said Long Tom, significantly. "The ties of old are not so easy forgotten. The rest of you are in the deal, then? Good enough. Now to business. There are three men whom I am willing to pay well for

having them cared for—Little Volcano, Zimri Coon and the fellow they call Crazy Billy. For the young fellow I am ready to give two thousand dollars—and one thousand more if you prove his death within one week from this. Coon I don't care so much for—only it would be safer for all to stop his wind. I'll give you two hundred apiece for him. The other—kill him; arrange it so I can see his body, and on that day I will give you each man one thousand dollars. I bid high, because I don't want you to slight the job. Do it up in style, and then come to me for the stamps. Is it a bargain?"

An eager assent was given. It would be many a day before another such glorious chance was given them—better than grubbing for gold, or even plucking drunken geese.

"At that figure I would engage to depopulate the State," earnestly declared the Preacher.

"You have all helped me make money—it is only right that I should be generous. But now for the details. You will attend to the two first. You say they have left town. There is only one place they would be likely to go to; Sleepy George can guide you there. He heard all their talk about the gold mine, and knows the neighborhood, if not the exact spot. Go there, find them out, watch your chance and strike swift and sure. If you can't wipe out every sign of the deed, just take off their top-knots and their death will be laid to the red-skins. Then look after Crazy Billy—don't let him slip you like the last time, George."

The bumper grinned sheepishly as he remembered how neatly Zimri Coon had pulled the wool over his eyes that day.

"The placer—what of that?" muttered one of the men.

"The gold will keep. Rub them out and the secret will belong to you. After your work is done, you can act as you please about the placer—sell it, run it yourselves, or anything else to please the crowd."

"But that's enough. Take a drink, then go fit yourselves out for the job. Go well heeled, for unless you get in the first stroke you'll have your work cut out for you. Better not start until after dark. That will give them a chance to get fairly at work, and will keep your movements from all curious eyes."

"Gentlemen—here's luck to your trip. May you soon come to me for your pay in full!"

The toast was duly honored; then the party left their chief, after he had singled out Sleepy George as the leader, bidding the others serve him as though he were Long Tom in person.

The worthies separated and each went about his own business. Weapons they had in plenty, but fresh ammunition was bought, liquor-flasks were filled, provisions stowed away in the smallest possible compass, for hunting was not to be thought of on their present expedition.

The shades of night settled down over Hard Luck, and with the increase of twinkling lights, so the town seemed to be waking up from its daily slumber, as the diggers turned out for their nightly amusements.

A shadowy figure lurked near the Miner's Rest, now and then whistling a few low notes. The signal—for such it undoubtedly was—was soon answered by the appearance of a female figure, shrouded in a cloak. Together they glided out to the spring, and there engaged in a hurried and earnest conversation. Close together they stood—just as little Volcano had espied them one night before; again the tender words, the kiss, the caress—and once again a hurried separation as the sound of an approaching footstep came to their ears. The man vanished; the woman hastened back to the hotel.

The unconscious intruder knelt beside the spring and drank eagerly. The moonlight revealed the handsome countenance of the gambler—Long Tom.

The night passed on. A dark figure lurked before the hotel, close shrouded in a Mexican serape. The building was dark and still. But as he watched, a door cautiously opened. A small figure issued, seemingly that of a woman. As it passed on, the watcher sprang forward and barred the way. There came a muffled scream as the heavy hand was felt—then a glimmering flash and the sound of a stroke. The watcher staggered back—the shadowy figure darted away like a spirit.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TWO CURIOUS VISITORS.

WITH ready weapon Zimri Coon awaited beside the faintly-glowing embers. One less thoroughly versed in the tricks and wiles of savage warfare would have sought cover, knowing that the creeping shadow must have made him out long since—before the keenest eyes could have distinguished it from among the other shadows. But the old hunter could boast better training. If such had been his intention, the prowling figure could easily have picked off one or both without showing himself. So, determined to know just what the prowler was after, Coon remained motionless as death, only his eyes moving as the figure crept nearer, yet with every faculty upon the alert, each muscle in readiness for prompt action.

At this juncture Little Volcano awoke and sat up, yawning and stretching his arms. The creeping figure flattened to the ground and lay motionless as one of the adjacent rocks. Zimri Coon turned his head quickly toward his young friend, meaning to warn him, when a lightning change passed over the boy miner's face, a look of wondering surprise filling his eyes.

The old man turned quickly, and a nervous quiver crept over him. Close before him stood a little, oddly-dressed figure with outstretched hand, in which gleamed a tiny package of something white. How could he have got there without alarming ears that could almost keep time with the dropping of feathery snowflakes?

The washbowl-looking hat, the braided queue, the dough face lighted up only by the twinkling eyes, more piggyish than ever, the coarse, blue blouse, the baggy trousers—all proclaimed the "John"—and a little exclamation from the boy miner told that the Celestial was recognized.

"Chough Leel what are you doing here?"

A sleepy smile gradually overspread the Celestial's face, and the little package left his hand and settled down in that of the boy miner—as Zimri afterward declared, of its own accord—"durned ef the pesky imp ever moved a muskle!"

Little Volcano slowly turned the package over. It was a letter addressed to himself—"Mr. Little Volcano," the address looking queer enough to him. The writing was plainly that of a woman, small and characteristic, though even and regular.

Half-suspecting the truth, yet trying to doubt, Little Volcano looked up from his inspection, intending to question Chough Lee—but the Celestial was gone, had vanished as silently as had been his coming. Old Zimri's jaws fell and his eyes dilated as he drew closer to the fire.

"They's the devil's work goin' on yere—I can't make it out! I was watchin' him all the time—didn't even wink with both eyes to once—'nd he jist melted away. 'Taint healthy 'round yere—I'm gwine to puckachee!" he affirmed, in an unsteady tone.

"He had his orders, no doubt, and slipped off when we wasn't looking. But this—this note; it's from her, I think—what shall I do about it?"

"Chuck it in the fire—don't hold it no longer, don't, little 'un," muttered the superstitious hunter, casting an uneasy glance around them.

"That's some trick in it—critters like him don't kerry letters fer nothin'—chuck it in the fire and let's git out o' yere while we kin—"

Little Volcano broke into a merry laugh at his superstitious friend's words; then, acting on a sudden impulse, he tore open the wafered note. There was neither address nor superscription inside. The words were evidently written in great haste if not strong agitation.

"You are in great danger. Six men are following you. They are promised a large sum if they murder you. They start to-night. I send you this by a sure hand. There can be no mistake. I can place all confidence in my informant. I pray God that I may be in time! Be careful, for my sake."

So the note ran. Its contents were both bitter and sweet. She—for right well he knew that Mary Morton wrote those words—bade him be cautious for her sake. But this informant in whom she could place all confidence—could it be the man with whom she held that stolen interview beside the spring? Who was he then, that knew so much of Sleepy George and his—Ha! Like magic came the remembrance of the handsome young gambler—Laughing Dick—the same figure—could it be? If so, all might be accounted for—except her treachery.

"You can read it, old man," he said, shortly, turning the paper over to Coon, who slowly, laboriously spelled out each word.

"It seems plain enough," was his quiet comment. "The gal means well, no doubt. Pity she's tuck up with sech mean trash as she must 'a' did, to know so much. Jedgin' from what you told me t'other night, little 'un, you've did the wisest thing you could in leaving Hard Luck ahind ye. A gal like that hain't the one to tie to—though I must say you couldn't pick up a purtier bit o' human flesh in a month's travel. But that it is. Looks is mighty 'ceivin', like a hafe-ripe persimmoning."

"You don't—don't think I could have deceived myself," asked Little Volcano, striving to speak coolly, but with an eager, longing light in his eyes that only too plainly shadowed forth the answer he wished, rather than hoped to receive.

"From what you told me, I jedge that was ready did to your hand," dryly replied Coon. "Now look, little 'un. Either you see'd what you see'd, or you didn't. You wasn't drunk then, whatever you mought 'a' bin after. You saw her—or rather him a-huggin' her, an' she a-takin' it just as though she liked it. You saw 'em kissin', too. Now, honest, little 'un, what kind of a woman is it that 'll tell a feller she loves him harder 'n a mule kin kick frozen pumpkins down-hill, an' then go an' hug an' slobber kisses all over another he-critter's mug that very same night?"

Little Volcano made no answer, but sat mood-

ily staring at the faintly-glowing embers, crumpling the warning note in his hand.

"We know this much. She hain't got no 'lations in the world, 'cept that woman which sit the road-agents that day—cl'ar grit, she is! pity the little cuss she hitched to didn't hev some o' it! You know she don't got no 'lation—you hearn Miss Champion say so, same's I did. Then who was it she met out yender in the night? 'Twasn't a honest man, or he'd come out flatfooted an' played his hand like a man. Mebbe 'twas Long Tom—they say he's little old blazes 'mong the petticoats. You mustn't flare up, little 'un. 'Twas 'ither him or somebody else as she was ashamed to meet an' claim in open day. If 'twas him, thar's some things made cl'ar. You told her whar you was goin'. Now how did them cusses find out so much? How did that pesky, slippery John know whar to find us? Why didn't he wait fer us to ax some questions? Because he was afeard we'd find out too much!"

"Thar's reason in what you say, pard, and yet—I cannot believe her so false! You may laugh at me—call me a simple fool, if you will—but if ever woman was in sober earnest, she was when she told me she loved me. I'll stake my life on that," earnestly cried the boy miner.

"An'so, I don't doubt, would t'other feller," quietly interposed the old man. "Rough an' tough old cuss as I be, little 'un, I've hed a power o' dealin's with woman in my time. I tell you, boy—but thar; I won't say no more. Keep your faith while ye kin. Think the best of the little gal; but make up your mind to bar the wu't after all. Wait patiently untel our work's did up, then you kin go to her an' ax her to make a clean breast of it. Ef she kin 'splain away that night's job, they won't be nobody gladder to 'knowledge his misjudgetment than me, nor nobody readier to beg her pardon fer what I've said. But at the same time, lad, stick up yer rights. 'Member she's giv' you the right to jedge her, when she 'cepted your love an' said she cottoned to you. Ef she's did what you think wrong in your own sister, don't play it's right in her. Be honest with yourself, an' the good Lord will make every crooked thing straight as don't desearve to stay crooked."

Zimri drew a long breath after delivering himself of this sermon, unusually serious for him, and looked wistfully at his young comrade, whose thoughts were evidently far away. Yet the words were not unheeded. As the old man ceased, the boy miner put forth his hand, with a look of sincere friendship. Strangely mated as they were, love, pure and steadfast as ever united brothers born, bound them to each other.

"The time'll come, little 'un, when we'll laugh wuss'n twin guinea-pigs over all this bother. It's all in a lifetime, anyway. But now—I reckon we'd better kin'le up the fire an' git a bite o' grub. It's 'bout time we war on the tramp ag'in. Ef them fellers is a'ter us, we've wasted too much time a'ready. We mustn't let 'em git too fur ahead o' us. Knowin' jist about whar to look, they mought accidently stum'le on the placer. Fight or no fight, we must strike the fust pick thar, or miner's laws'll be ag'in us."

"Though the gift comes from a blood-stained hand, I hold that I earned it honestly, and those who think to have the good of it must climb over me first."

A desultory conversation followed, generally dealing with their plans for meeting the machinations of any interlopers, but it need not be recorded here.

The fire was kindled anew, a pot of coffee was soon boiling, and bits of bacon toasting. The savor awakened their appetites, and both ate heartily of the rude viands, washing it down with cool, pure water from the spring.

A peculiar sound filled the air—long drawn, shrill and unearthly. The eyes of the old hunter sparkled eagerly as he peered out into the darkness.

"Thar's music fer ye, little 'un! Sweeter to me than the voice o' woman—a heap! 'Fectionate critter, too—a man don't fergit a love-hug from them arms werry soon—not much!"

"It sounds like a woman screaming in agony!" muttered Little Volcano, his eyes dilating.

"It's like a woman in more things than that," chuckled old Coon. "Nuther on 'em kin be 'pended on longer'n ye kin wink twicet. They both—lis'en!"

Again that weird, mournful cry—rising and falling, full of a peculiar music, fascinating, yet terrible—dying away in a sobbing moan. Then all was still—seemingly tenfold so as the echoes died away. Little Volcano recognized it now—the voice of the panther.

"We'd better be travelin', I reckon," cried Coon, looking to his weapons. "The smell 'll draw her here, an' 'twouldn't sca'cely do to burn powder, not knowin' who's our neighbors. Ef the varmint takes our trail, why then we'll hev to wipe it out, but I don't reckon she'll foller us far—"

Without warning growl or snarl, a huge beast sprung into the firelit circle, crouching down, brushing the sward with its long tail, showing its white teeth, its sharp claws, a phosphorescent light streaming from its eyes—a panther, in the full prime of strength and vigor—a terrible foe!

CHAPTER XIX.

CRAZY BILLY TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME.

For the second time that evening—almost within the hour—Zimri Coon stood face to face with a disagreeable visitor, and now, as then, he wished himself far away from the spot. Not that he feared to measure his skill against the brute—he could show marks of at least two death-grapples with like antagonists, and his was truly a hunter's spirit. But since he knew that the enemy was upon their trail—possibly even then within earshot—he felt that a single shot might prove fatal to his hopes. Hence it was, that he did not attempt to use his rifle, though the panther lay scarce twenty feet away, in the full glare of the little camp.

"Mind your eye, little 'un!" he muttered, crouching forward in readiness to meet the threatened leap, holding his long knife firmly.

"Don't you remember—it's him—Crazy Billy," muttered Little Volcano, "and that's the panther we saw—"

"Crazy Billy—yes, they call me crazy," interrupted the hermit, turning back his long, tangled locks. "They laugh at me, and call me crazy—the fools! They are envious of me—that is all. I am too wise—they cannot understand me—that is the reason. And yet—my head does whirl round and round, sometimes, and aches and throbs until I go to sleep—but that is only when I try to remember what happened ages and ages ago—before this world was built. My head never hurt then—I was so happy and contented with *her*! But *he* came—he crawled across our path—a cold, slimy devil! His evil eyes—they burn me now! There was honey on his tongue, but it could sting—it stung *her*, and she died—did she die?"

The panther, recognizing its name, arose and placed its forepaws upon Crazy Billy's shoulders, rubbing its cheek against his face with a low, eager whine.

"Kin you tell whar they be now?" eagerly demanded Zimri.

Crazy Billy looked at him vacantly, as though not understanding his words, but when Little Volcano repeated the query, his face lightened immediately, and he pointed toward the East, saying:

"They are there. They smoke and eat and drink around the fire, and tell their secrets to Beauty and I. I looked, but *he* wasn't there, so I come on to find you, Harry."

"Ax him to take us whar we kin git a fa'r squint at the riptyles, little 'un," muttered Zimri. "No," he added, quickly, reading aright the boy miner's look. "I don't mean to



LITTLE VOLCANO, WITH A QUICK AIM, DISCHARGED HIS PISTOL AT THE ANIMAL'S HEAD JUST BEFORE IT CAME ABREAST OF HIM.—Page 5.

"Cold steel must do it—fer your life don't burn powder!"

The terrible beast drew back, sitting upon its haunches, quivering in every muscle as though about to launch its lithe body forward, grinning and baring its curved talons—purring loudly, like a mammoth cat.

Then—just as Zimri fairly held his breath in expectation of receiving the fierce onset—a wild looking figure glided into the firelight with the noiseless foot of a bodiless spirit, pausing beside the panther, whose purr changed to a low whine of joy, as it rubbed its sleek head against the man's legs.

"Wal, I ber-durned!" snorted Zimri Coon, dropping his weapon in abject surprise. "The hull durned menadgery busted loose and come to give us a benefit! Call up the riss—don't be bashful—waitz out the hull tormented outfit—on, Lord!"

"They told me so—but I know they lied! He stole her away, and hid her in one of the stars. I heard her call to me—I was going to help her, but he covered up the star and I lost my way. I look and look—but I can't find it; can you tell me? Tell me where my angel is, and I will bless you—"

The comrades listened to his incoherent outburst with feelings akin to awe, so passionate was the hermit's utterance. But before they could answer his appeal, his air changed abruptly, and he spoke to Little Volcano, in a quiet, composed tone, entirely free from any trace of insanity:

"I am glad to see you, Harry. I have been looking for you, ever since that day—when I was taken ill. You are in danger—there are men upon your trail, sworn to have your life. I saw them—I listened to their words. They never guessed that Beauty and I were so near."

make no fuss with 'em. We can't *swar* they're a'ter us, ye know. 'Twon't do to give 'em no funder hold on us. They's bin a heap o' talk a'ready, an' 'twouldn't take much more to set the vigilantys hot-foot on our backs—an' you know what that is; hangin' fust, trial a'terwards, 'vidin' they hain't too busy stringin' up some other critter. I jist want to git a look at 'em—to sorter mark 'em down in my knowledge box, so I'll know jist whar to hit, when the time comes. Ax him."

"Will you take us to where those men are?" asked the boy miner, touching Crazy Billy upon the shoulder, to draw his attention from the fawning panther.

The hermit started and looked up, but the steady light of reason was gone, and in its place came the old, restless look, bright but unmeaning.

"Listen! don't you hear—that humming—"

sound? It grows louder and louder—hal hold my head—quick!" and he caught Little Volcano's hands and pressed them to his forehead. "That is it—they grow quieter, now. You must stay with me, though. If you go away again, they will get angry, and go humming and buzzing louder and louder, until my head flies to pieces—that is what *he* wants. He put them in there—listen—don't even whisper—hornets!"

Little Volcano could scarce keep his countenance at the idea of this perambulating hornet's nest, while Zimri was forced to turn aside to snicker in his sleeve. Crazy Billy, however, seemed to see nothing of all this. He started suddenly, glanced quickly around, with widely dilated eyes, then picked up his heavy staff and motioned the miners to follow him.

other sort o' game; or they'll go fer us kerchuck! I reckon we kin play to either hand—but mind yo, little'un; ef it comes to downright work, jest put in your best licks. 'It'll be either them or us. 'Twon't do to let even *one* on 'em go back to tell what's come o' t'others. You understand?"

"I won't begin the quarrel, but when it *does* come, I'll try my best to make my teeth meet, you can be sure of that," laughed Little Volcano. "A fellow can only die once, and when I go under there's going to be a benefit for somebody besides myself—sure!"

There was little more said. Crazy Billy led the way—or rather followed the lead of Beauty, who glided steadily along like a well-trained hound upon a scent, only differing in not giving mouth. Close at his heels followed the com-

submissive, as they cautiously advanced toward the glimmering camp-fire. Ten minutes sufficed. At the end of that time they peered out upon the encampment of Long Tom's emissaries.

They had evidently eaten heartily. Sprawled at full length around the fire, they were smoking and drinking, talking over their prospects of finding their "game." Though as yet no names had been spoken the miners could not long doubt who and what that game was.

"We'll ketch 'em up to-morrer, sartin," quoth Sleepy George. "We ain't more'n a dozen mile from whar the valley is—ef I ain't wrong—in which we'll find the gold. They won't be lookin' fer us—I reckon they think they done played it mighty fine. We'll let 'em git fairly to work, so they can't be no mistake, then we'll out an' make a clean job on it."



THE BANK GAVE WAY BENEATH HIS WEIGHT, AND HE ROLLED DOWN INTO THE RAVINE, TO THE VERY FEET OF THE MINERS.—Page 8.

"Will you show us where these bad men are, then?" persisted the boy miner.

"Come—they are calling—I can't wait!" impatiently cried the hermit, pausing and glancing back.

"Hail we—"

"I reckon. Mebbe he'll take us thar—even if he does lead us on a fool trail, 'twon't be much lost time. It's most too dark to find out jist who we've got to back ag'inst," replied Zimri, pressing forward.

"If he don't run us right into their camp—that might be awkward," said the boy miner, half-laughing.

"He said they had a fire. I reckon we kin keep from that. But s'pose we—*durn* that stub!" as he tripped and nearly fell headlong over a root, just recovering himself. "Ef we do—thar's two things. Mebbe they'll play sheep—try to make out they was after some

rages, doggelly determined to see the end, though far from feeling sure that the hermit's destination was the one they desired. They could only hope—he turned a deaf ear to all their questions, stalking on without even noticing them by a look.

"Look yend'r!" suddenly muttered Zimri, pointing ahead. "Thar's a fire—hold, by—! Stop!" and he caught Crazy Billy by the shoulder.

With a single motion the hermit freed himself, though with a force that caused the miner to reel and his arm to tingle for an hour after. But as Little Volcano touched his shoulder he stood silent and submissive.

"Call in Beauty—we must creep up closer. Can you keep him quiet?" whispered the boy miner.

At a sign the panther fell back like a pointer coming to heel. Nor did Crazy Billy seem less

"But about this placer—I don't exactly understand the rights of it," said Laughing Dick, rising to replenish his pipe. "Is the boss to come in for the lion's share of that?"

"Not much—he sais what we make is so much cl'ar gain over an' above our pay. We'll clean out the pocket, too; an' mebbe 'twill pan out enough fer us all to turn gentlemen—who knows?" grinned the bummer.

Little Volcano drew a long breath as the young gambler arose. That same figure—it must be!

"Easy!" muttered Zimri, pressing the lad's arm, reading his thought and fearing he was about to draw a weapon. "Member your promise! The time hain't—Ge-thunder!"

There was good cause for his exclamation. As the boy miner released his grasp upon Crazy Billy's shoulder, the hermit arose and stepped out into full view, gliding up to the fire.

The outlaws stared in surprise, and for a mo-

ment seemed about to make a break for cover, but then a low, devilish chuckle from Sleepy George reassured them.

"Who says luck ain't on our side? That's one o' the worms now, a-axin' us suckers to swaller him. That's the cuss they call Crazy Billy—mighty kind to save us so much trouble. Hyar goes fer that—"

"Boss said we must take him last," put in one fellow.

"Who's to tell him better? What's the use in waitin' to hunt fer what's run right in our grip? You jest watch—see how pretty I'll play bugs on the cuss, an' he'll never know it," chuckled the miscreant, arising and gliding toward the hermit.

Crazy Billy seemed unconscious of his peril, and Little Volcano half-arose to rush to his assistance. But it was not needed. Before Sleepy George was within arm's length of his intended victim, a long dark body shot through the air, alighting full upon the bummer's breast, hurling him heavily to the ground. It was Beauty.

With shouts of anger and alarm, the outlaws sprung to their feet, drawing pistols and knives. But, before they could do more, Crazy Billy uttered a peculiar cry and sprang into the darkness, immediately followed by Beauty.

"Kill 'em—kill 'em!" screamed Sleepy George, but his voice was drowned by a sharp report, and he fell back with a wild yell of agony!

CHAPTER XX.

OLD ZIMRI MAKES A DISCOVERY.

ZIMRI COON it was that fired that shot. Though nothing was further from his wishes than a collision with Long Tom's party, at least just then, the crisis found him ready for work. As Sleepy George drew near his intended victim both of the ambushed miners covered his heart with their firearms; but Beauty required no assistance, and the bummer was stricken down. Sleepy George's comrades answered his yell for help promptly enough, but before they could make use of their weapons Crazy Billy appeared to awaken from his trance-like state and, calling to the panther, bounded into cover. Sleepy George sprang to his feet—only to reel back, his face covered with blood as the spiteful crack of the old digger's rifle rung forth. With a quick but unerring aim Zimri Coon sent the leaden pellet to its mark, then, with a shrill, taunting laugh, he turned and glided away, still firmly grasping the boy miner's arm.

"Keep close to the crazy critter—run light, an' we'll fool 'em slicker 'n geese-geese," muttered Zimri Coon, as they caught sight of the hermit and his faithful follower. "They'll think a hull army's 'bushed 'em—they'll take to kiver an' waste a hour tryin' to surround an' out-bamboozle nobody—the pesky greenhorns!"

"You killed him—I saw him fall," muttered the boy miner, half-resentfully, as he remembered how Zimri had prevented his firing a shot when Laughing Dick stood almost within arm's length.

Coon chuckled in high glee, but made no reply, for Crazy Billy and Beauty were gradually distancing them. Though he had no fixed plans, Zimri was not quite ready to part company, and so they pressed on more rapidly as they were now far beyond ear-shot of the enemy, if, as he believed, no pursuit had been made.

Moodily enough Little Volcano followed, his thoughts only too busy. Black and bitter were they. Despite her avowal of love—despite the warning note brought by Chough Lee, he believed Mary Morton had been playing with him—nor did he stop to ask himself her reasons. Since that night he had recalled many little points which had passed unnoticed before.

He knew that Laughing Dick boarded at the Miner's Rest. He had seen him more than once speaking with Mary, though she had always appeared cool and distant—still that might be only prudence. Then came that meeting beside the spring—as the figures were recalled he more than ever believed Laughing Dick was the man. And, too, how had she learned the plans of Sleepy George and his fellows—how but through her gambler lover? Yet there was one point. Could she play false with Laughing Dick, as well?

"Peg along, little 'un," cheerily uttered Zimri, as the boy miner stumbled over a loose stone, he evidently attributing it to fatigue. "We're most thar. Yender's the place whar I used Sleepy George fer grizzly b'ar bait—he! he! ho! ho! Durned ef that dodge won't be the death o' me yit! Squeal—oh, git out! The varmint was wide awake then, you bet!"

"He's going to the cave then. I'm glad of that. He's got something there I want to have another look at. I was too bad scared when here before, but I heard them talking about it in town—that is, something like it; those pictures at the hotel, you know."

"I'd give a purty to know the hull story o' them—yes, I would," muttered Coon, thoughtfully. "They must be a story—an' that pesky Long Tom's mixed up 'long o' it. Why, chalk 'd a' made a black mark on his face when he saw 'em!"

"I wish it was in any other place, though. Ever 'f the animals ain't thoroughly tamed,

they are chained up so I don't reckon they could get loose. But the snakes aren't. I could see and hear dozens—hundreds, for what I know—and felt them crawling all over me as I lay there—ugh!"

"I don't reckon thar's much use in our goin' inside—them dratted cusses is the wust to give a critter the ager you ever hearn tell," suddenly added Zimri.

Little Volcano chuckled. He knew right well what a pious horror his old friend had of snakes, whether venomous or not.

"You can wait for me, outside—but I must see that picture again. If I can remember aright, it will give me the clew I've been hunting for these three years."

Neither spoke again until the cave was reached. The hermit entered and struck a light, and then called aloud for them to enter. Little Volcano obeyed without hesitation, and Zimri kept close at his heels.

"I reckon I kin go wharever you do," was his quiet response to the quick look of Little Volcano. "We're pards, you know. What comes to one, comes to the both on us."

The scene was a peculiar one. All around crouched the chained animals, now lying quiet as though recently fed. An owl or a bat would occasionally flit from perch to perch on noiseless wing. Besides these only the serpents seemed restless, gliding here and there, now coiling themselves into a glittering pyramid, now hissing sharply as though angry at being disturbed by the hermit as he passed by; but, though the warning rattle would skirr, the moccasin or copperhead hissing display their fangs, not one attempted to strike; and Little Volcano gradually recovered his composure, turning toward the painted canvas, dwelling long upon each figure, closely scanning each face in the different scenes.

He, too, recognized the likeness—as others had—to Long Tom; and another face seemed familiar—that of the victim who stood upon the scaffold in the last scene. But try as he might, he could not place it, until Zimri—who by this time had become in a measure used to the snakes—cried:

"Look at that young feller—it's your face, by—"

The boy miner started, as the truth flashed upon him. He knew the face now. He had seen the same—only a trifle younger—in the mirror.

"Stand still—don't move a muscle—if you stir an inch you are a dead man!" hissed Crazy Billy, gliding up beside them. "Obey, and I will save you—don't start, unless you wish to die. There is a rattlesnake coiled around your leg!"

The sickening horror inspired by these words stood the miners in good stead. They seemed stupefied—though every sense was painfully alert. Their first impulse was to rush for the open air, but fortunately their limbs refused to obey.

Unable to move, even to lower his eyes, Zimri Coon could feel the truth of the warning. Around his right leg—the one nearest the boy miner—an iron band seemed tightening itself until he felt that his leg would be crushed to a pulp. Now it seemed as though of ice—now of molten iron. Yet all this was the effect of imagination, since he had not noticed the presence of the snake until Crazy Billy spoke of it, nor had the reptile moved since, its eyes riveted upon those of the hermit as he crouched down before it.

A low humming sound came from the hermit's lips, growing louder and more distinct as he gradually extended his hand toward the reptile's head. For a moment it seemed as though the serpent would strike the extended hand, but then, as the voice grew clearer, its jaws closed, its head glided forward and rested upon the open palm. Inch by inch the scaly body glided around Zimri's leg, the snake crawling up the hermit's arm. It seemed to Coon as if the tendons of his limb were being pulled out, one by one, and the cold drops of perspiration started out upon his face, so acute was his imaginary torture.

Then Crazy Billy rose upright. The rattlesnake lay upon his arm as though sleeping. Zimri waited for no more. With one mad leap he was out of the cave, nor did he pause until at the foot of the hill, where Little Volcano found him, faint and breathless, trembling like a leaf.

"Shut up!" he gasped, as the boy miner began. "Don't you ever speak to me 'bout that, or I'll cut your heart out—I will, by—!"

"It's the picture I want to speak about, old friend," said Little Volcano, in a subdued tone. "Those two faces—one is Long Tom; the other is—or was—my brother!"

"It's like you as two peas. I never knowed you hed a brother—you never spoke of him."

"It is a black story, and I don't like to talk about it—but I must now. You saw those pictures—they will explain the most of it. My brother was arrested for murder—they found him beside the body, with a bloody knife in his hand. On that knife were his initials. Two men swore that they witnessed the murder. It seems that my brother and the dead man had been gambling together, and my brother lost a

very large sum—even more than he was worth, since it was found that the books—he was assistant cashier in a bank—were falsified. They quarreled in the gambling hall—came to blows, even. Brother swore he would be avenged. Then—they found him as that picture tells. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hung, on those two men's evidence. He was hung—and buried. That was when I was a child. When I grew up, I learned all this—and more. The two men whose evidence hung him, and who were both employed in the same bank, were suspected of fraud, but they fled, after robbing the bank of a large sum. They were never heard of again. But this, coupled with other facts which gradually came out, made me believe that brother had suffered innocently, and I took up the search, swearing never to leave it until dead, or I had brought the truth to light. And now—I believe I have found the men!"

"Long Tom and—"

"Crazy Billy!"

"It may be—but, lad, don't be too brash. Take time to think it all out. Let's wind up the job we're on first; then I'll help you all I know how. You'll do this fer me?"

"Yes—I have learned patience since I took the trail. A month more will not hurt. But I can't stay here—so near him, thinking as I do. If I saw him now I should shoot him like a dog! Come—let's get away from here."

Nothing loth, Zimri complied, and once more they set out toward the golden placer, in silence. They loth had too much to think of for speech.

The sun was crowning the mountains when Zimri halted, upon a rocky peak, and taking out his chart, carefully studied it as he glanced keenly around.

"Can you make anything out of it?" at length asked Little Volcano, a little nervously, now that the moment was at hand when the truth or falsity must be known.

"Ef the thing don't lie, I kin take you to the spot in five minnits!" promptly replied Zimri, refolding the chart. "Come—let's know the hull truth, one way or t'other."

Scrambling over rocks and crevices, swinging down by vines and bushes, the two men rapidly descended the hill, their faces growing flushed and more eager with every moment—already showing signs of the yellow fever. And then they stood in the little valley, where, according to the chart, lay the gold placer.

At some distant period this had been the bed of some mighty stream, coming from the heart of the mountains. The lowlders were rounded, the crags worn smooth, though now the valley was verdant; bushes, young trees and grass growing all around.

Then Little Volcano uttered a sharp cry as he sprang forward. Stooping, he tore away the sand—then stood erect. In his hands shone a dull yellow lump of metal, nearly as large as his clenched fist!

CHAPTER XXI.

PREPARING FOR WORK.

For one moment they stood glaring upon the lump of dull yellow metal. Their breath came in short, quick puffs. Their faces grew inflamed, their eyes bloodshot. Instead of blood, liquid fire seemed coursing through their veins.

Little Volcano suddenly drew back his hand and thrust the nugget into his pocket, scowling at Zimri Coon as though fearing lest he should attempt to rob him—then he fell upon his knees and began tearing up the sandy soil, flinging bits of rock aside with a curse after eagerly glancing at them—now and then uttering low, growling sounds of ferocious delight as other golden nuggets were unearthed by his nervous fingers.

He had the "yellow fever" in its most virulent form.

Zimri Coon stood by, leaning upon his rifle, his eyes riveted upon the flushed countenance of his friend, now scarcely human in its covetous madness. For one moment he too had been affected by the burning lust of gold—but the madness quickly left him as he noted its effects upon the boy miner. The frightful change in him acted as an antidote—and well it was that such was the case.

"Ef I was like him whar'd we be?" muttered the old man, wistfully watching the boy miner as he continued his frantic search. "Most like we would git to cuttin' of each other's throats afore sunset. At best we'd hev thoughts fer nothin' else but gold—jest keep on a-scratchin' fer it ontel we drapped down, clean tuckered out, or them 'tarnal cusses over yander sneak up an' fill our karkidges fuller 'n a Ute's head is o' lice. That's what it'd cend in. Mekke t'ill, anyhow—he's so durred headstrong an' contrary when he oncet gits sot, thar's most as much hope o' ticklin' a snappin'-turtle atween the shoulders 'th a straw, as movin' him! I'm most sorry we come—I am so!"

Little Volcano had eyes only for the gold. Indeed it was a sight to set wild far older and steadier heads than his. Truly the placer was a marvel of richness, were one to judge by the specimens already gathered.

Any other than a skilled miner might have passed over the spot scores of times and never

suspected what riches he was treading under foot. You have read of placers where the gold lay in such marvelous quantities that the sun's rays were refracted with blinding brilliancy—where one could load it into a wagon with a scow-shovel—provided one possessed those convenient accessories—and much more equally brilliant and truthful. Little Volcano was not so favored; his placer lacked all these glowing attributes—and perhaps 'twas just as well.

"It is a 'queer' sort of virgin gold that dazzles the eye—that lies *all above ground*, and still stranger soil in which the *real* gold will not hide itself, burrowing down until it is stopped by the clay or bed-rock.

In this case an old prospector would have been fairly pleased; the valley had been a water-course for ages untold, and at this point had made an abrupt turn against the base of a range. At the foot of this the soil was thin, composed first, of sand and gravel, mixed with earth; beneath this a few inches of black soil, resting upon hard, fine-grained clay. In this sand lay the bulk of the gold, unable to pass the dense clay. In some cases—though rarely—a nugget was exposed to view, where the soil was unusually thin; or something had torn up the ground.

Zimri Coon watched Little Volcano for some time, never noticed by the boy miner who tore up the ground and pried over pieces of stone with his knife as furiously as at first, nearly every minute unearthing a nugget of greater or less value—sometimes chancing upon a little nest where the precious bits of metal lay touching each other, until his pockets were crammed—then with a sigh the old man turned away. He at least had not forgotten the threatening danger—he knew that Sleepy George's party would not be long in making their appearance, and, once let them suspect the marvelous richness of this placer, they would hesitate at nothing in order to make its treasure their own.

"They ain't no use in thinkin' o' playin' sharp on 'em," muttered Zimri, thoughtfully. "The boy is dead gone. The devil hisself—hide, horns an' all—couldn't skeer him out o' this. He'll jest keep on a-diggin' ontel he smells thar powder a-burnin'—wuss luck! I'd like it, too—ef I dared let myself went—but ef I did I wouldn't know when to stop; then we *would* be gone, sure!"

He gazed keenly around. The scene was picturesque enough, but that wild beauty was not in his thoughts now. The towering hills and rocky crags, relieved by the dark-green shrubs an' trees, lining each side of the valley, were not half so interesting now as the loose-lying boulders lying along the hill's foot. A shrewd smile gradually lighted up his face as he nodded toward the perpendicular rock beyond Little Volcano.

"Right thar's the place—I kin rig it up fit to fight a hull tribe. Them dornicks yender's jest the ticket. Ef the boy would only wake up to lend a feller a hand—but he won't ontel he's clean tuckered out an' hed a snooze over it."

Though he believed there was an abundance of time, the old miner had learned prudence in his wanderings, and he at once set about the work he had planned, laboriously rolling heavy boulders together so as to form a rude semicircle with the face of the cliff for a back. At first Little Volcano paid no attention to him, but then, as the old man paused, breathless over his exertion, the boy miner's better self was awakened, and he sprung to his friend's assistance.

"Keep to your gold-scratchin', little 'un—I kin manidge by myself," said Zimri, kindly. "They's no pertic'lar hurry—jest so it's done afore night."

"So can the gold wait," half-laughed Little Volcano, wiping his streaming face. "I believe I was half-crazy—and isn't it enough to make one?" at the same time emptying his pockets of their precious load upon the shingle inside the little inclosure. "Look at that! Ten thousand dollars' worth, if there's a cent! and dead loads of it where that came from, too! Old man, we're the two richest men in California to-day!"

"That's good enough, little 'un," quietly replied Zimri; "but it ain't everythin'. Old as I be, I val'e my life as more 'n all the gold ever hearn on. That's why I'm doin' this work, instead o' rakin' in the purty nuggets."

"You think *they'll* find us, then?"

"I know it—jest as sure as the sun is up yender, them buzzards o' 'tarnal cussedness 'll nose us out here—"

"But if Sleepy George alone knew where we were headed for—and he's past telling—"

"Past smellin', little 'un," chuckled Zimri, gleefully. "Past smellin' I'll not gainsay—but I reckon his j'win'-tackle ain't past workin', yit. I told you I didn't keer about strikin' the fust blow—nur I wouldn't 'a' did as much as I did ef they hadn't pitched onto that crazy critter. Seein' they did that, I thought I'd mark the varmint—an' so I did, for keeps! Sleepy George wasn't never no beauty, but I reckon he's no better—a pesky sight wuss, now—fer I tuck off the eend o' his nose—Lord! how the cuss did squeal! Reckon he thought the devil was helpin' him blow his bugle that time—an' never stoppin' to cool his fingers, nuther," and the old

fellow went off into a fit of laughter that did not improve his wind any.

"If he comes within range here I'll choose a better mark than his nose," muttered the boy miner. "But to work. 'We'll finish this first, then rake in what gold we can before they come to trouble us.'"

"We'd ought to have more grub; they's no tellin' how long the cusses 'll keep us cooped up—'tain't in 'em to stan' up to thar gruel an' hev it out like men. They'll try the sneakin' dodge, most likely," grumbled Coon.

"We've enough for a week, with care. It will be ended before that time. Water will be the worst. There's none nearer than the spring, over yonder, and our canteens won't hold much."

"That's easy fixed. They's plenty of flat rocks an' good stiff clay. I'll dig a hole in thar, lay rocks bottom an' sides, plaster 'em thick with clay, an' thar you hev it. But fust git up these walls; then while you're fillin' up the holes—fix some with stone plugs in so you kin pull 'em out to shoot through—I'll 'tend to makin' the well."

The comrades worked stoutly, never thinking of fatigue, for both were eager to get back to the gold. Zimri built his "well" and filled it with water from the spring. It held probably ten gallons, and seemed perfectly tight. A flat stone served as a cover, to keep it from the sun and dust. By this time Little Volcano had finished his chinking. The result was an admirable stone fort, some twenty feet long by ten in diameter, at its widest part, completely bullet-proof, unless when the plugs were removed from the loop-holes.

"We wasn't none too soon, nuther," muttered Zimri to the boy miner, as they recommenced turning over the dirt for gold. "Don't move your head, but look up yender, jist to the right of whar we come down."

The figure of a man was distinctly visible for a moment, then quickly disappeared behind a clump of bushes.

"The cuss hes jest sighted us. Never mind—keep on workin'. They know now whar we air an' what we're doin'. I'll see that they don't git too close, never fear, though I s'pect they'll lay low ontel they kin work onder kiver o' night."

Little Volcano obeyed, having implicit confidence in his chum. Zimri was to all appearance equally absorbed in the search, but scarce a leaf rustled upon either side that his keenly roving eye did not instantly note and penetrate the cause of it.

The sun was sinking to rest, and the shadows growing too thick for easy watching, when Zimri gave Little Volcano the word to knock off for the night. They did not yet enter the little fort, but lay outside, eating their scanty supper, waiting until the shade should be deep enough to hide their movements. Coon could see that the enemy were gradually creeping nearer, though he gave no signs of suspecting danger. He, like Little Volcano, wished the crisis to come as quickly as possible.

Then they crept into the fort, lying at their loop-holes with weapons ready for work. The moon was shining clearly. Though the valley was studded here and there with bushes, the enemy could not pass within pistol-shot without venturing over open ground.

"Thar they come!" muttered Zimri, some little time before midnight. "Let 'em come up close. I'll hail 'em—but we must let 'em give the fust lick—mind that!"

Five minutes later, he called aloud, demanding their business. For a moment they hesitated, evidently confused by the unexpected challenge, but then, with loud cries, they sprung forward, firing with every step, apparently resolved to end all at one fierce blow. Then rung out the rifle of the old hunter, keeping time with the crack of Little Volcano's revolvers.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER FINGER IN THE PIE.

BLENDING with and rising high above the report of the old miner's rifle, there comes a shriek so wild and piercing, so full of mortal anguish and utter despair, that even in that moment of dark passion and deadly hatred more than one cheek pales, more than one heart turns faint and sick. But only for a moment. The stakes are well worth winning. The gamblers press on—yelling, cursing like veritable fiends. Their pistols speak rapidly—the leaden pellets flattening against the rock fort. Bright flashes and spiteful reports answer them—the sulphurous cloud overhangs all like a pall.

Then the fierce ardor of the gamblers begins to cool, even while the rude pile of stones lies almost within arm's length. They had counted upon a surprise—for if their plans were all arranged; but such a hot reception was not among them. It is hard work, this fighting men who are invisible, who can be placed only by the lightning gleam of their firearms, lacking a leader, as they do—for Sleepy George can scarcely be called one. And so, cursing bitterly, they retreat—two more shots from the barricade and the retreat becomes a stampede.

A taunting laugh follows them, doubly hard to bear since it assures them that both their in-

tended victims are alive and uninjured, while they—more than one bears stinging wounds, while there, lying still and stark just in the edge of the shadow, lies one of their number, his crime-stained heart forever stilled.

"Whoo—ee!" screamed Zimri Coon, his shrill voice ringing with exultation. "Pick up your legs an' travel, ye woolly-backed galoots o' nat'ral cussedness—hunt your holes, ye bob-tailed horn-toads o' perdition! Whoo—hee! Your'e the high-toned whangdoodles as the yeth hain't good enough fer your feet to tramp on—come here to skeer two pore little orfint babbys out o' thar pin-a-hinds—an' they only get a couple o' tatter popguns! Oh, git out! Go shake yourselves! send us some men, next time!"

"Work 'em up, old man," cried Little Volcano, with a reckless laugh. "Shame 'em into coming again if you can. The dirty cowards must turn tail and sneak off just as it began to grow interesting."

"Six overgrown dogs rigged up to look like men—to back down afore two—one a old critter as hain't got no eyes, only one tooth an' hit a holler 'un, so clean worn out he hes to lean up ag'in' a tree to cough, an' t'other 'un a little boy as hain't got shet of the smell o' his mammy's milk! Sufferin' Moses! it makes me sick—it does so! Don't be so pesky bashful—don't now! 'Tain't good manners to foller us so far, not to make a longer call nor that—"

"Don't you be snatched, old coon—I reckon we'll stay with ye long's your stomach kin stan' it."

"Hooh! I hear a coyote yelpin'—that's grizzly bait a-belchin' now. Sleepy George—come an' see me!"

There was no reply made to this cordial invitation, nor was anything more heard from the enemy, though Zimri aired his sarcastic eloquence some minutes longer, racking his brain to devise insulting epithets and "odorous" comparisons, seeking to draw the gamblers from their covert. But even his tongue tired, and he relapsed into disgusted silence. Evidently the enemy were resolved to await the coming day.

"They's no use in our both stayin' awake," at length said Zimri, to the boy miner. "Them cowardly rip don't mean to do nothin' more to night, an' one pa'r o' eyes kin do all the watchin' needful. You lay down fer a couple o' hours, then I'll roust ye out an' try a snooze myself. No back talk—do as I tell ye."

It was a dreary watch, and more than once Zimri caught himself wishing for the day-dawn. The moon rolled steadily along, soon dipping beyond the western rock-range, throwing the little valley into deepest shadow, and though the stars twinkled brightly, their rays served only to render darkness visible—to increase the many shadows which seemed to be creeping here and there, each one taking the shape of a bloodthirsty enemy to the strained eyes of the watcher. A night vigil not soon to be forgotten, and with a sensation of profound relief Zimri Coon watched the growing light in the east.

Eagerly he peered out over the valley, for, during the past hour, while the gloom was the deepest, he had heard the gamblers busy at work—and now he saw the result.

Before him, distant some fifty yards, was a rude wall, or rather pile of rocks, thrown hastily together. Behind this rose a clump of bushes, and a scattering line of similar ones, under cover of which a creeping man could easily pass beyond rifle-shot of the rock fort, in case of need.

"You keep your word well, old man," said the boy miner, awakening with a yawn. "Why didn't you call me, as you said?"

"They'll be plenty time afore all's done, little 'un. Take a squint out thar—looks like the cusses meant little old business, don't it? The pesky cowards mean to try the starvin'-out dodge, I raily b'lieve!" in disgust.

"Look at that body!" muttered Little Volcano, in a hoarse, strained voice. "Don't you recognize it?"

"Looks like—durned ef 'tain't!" was the reply, after a moment's scrutiny. "He won't never steal no more chips."

"Laughing Dick! if *she* only knew—"

"'Twasn't *you* did it, little 'un. I see'd the varmint drap when I pulled trigger. I didn't know him, then, but ef it'd bin broad day, he's the werry one I'd 'a' picked out. As for her—s'posin' they wasn't no mistake in your seein' them together—why, it jest sarves her right fer consortin' with sech or'nary trash."

"Look—they are showing a rag! 'Tisn't *white*, but I suppose it's meant for a flag of truce. Better answer."

"Say, you fellers!" came a challenge, in a muffled, indistinct voice. "We want to have a talk."

"Who's hinderin' on ye, ye durn fool?"

"Promise not to shoot, and I'll come out where we can talk more comf'tably; honor bright, now."

"You can't come no brace game on me, lady-back—not nuch! I wouldn't trust ye farder 'n you could sling a dead grizzly by the tail—which is mighty short grips. You kin speak your speech from onder kiver; the fust inch o' hide I see 'll hev to kiver a bullet—"

shore! You struck the fust lick, an' now we're playin' fer keeps, you mind that," retorted Zimri, at his loophole.

"That's a lie! you shot me last night like a coward sneak in the bushes!" screamed Sleepy George, evidently fairly awake now, if never before.

"When I pull on a critter, he's dead meat, he is. Say yer say, or shet your trap."

"That's easy said—short an' sweet," interrupted another voice, impatiently. "You have jumped our claim, hyar, ag'in' all diggers' law, an' when we tempt to git back our own, you pitch onto us from a ambush an' shoot one o' us, dead. We've got the law on our side an' would be held cl'ar in shootin' ye down like thieves an' murderers; but we're easy-goin' critters. We don't want to be too hard on ye this time. Jist promise ye won't try to make no more rumpus, an' we'll let ye go free, takin' with ye what you dug yesterday. That's plain an' easy to onderstan'. Now what ye goin' to do 'bout it?"

"Fust: every word you've spoken is a durned lie, 'cept what's true, an' that's a lie, too! This is our claim. You never knowed o' this spot 'till you dogged us here. You watched us ontel you thought you cotched us nappin', then you tried to wipe us out—you burned the fust powder. We did make cold meat o' one o' you, an' stan' ready to sarve the rest jist the same way. As fer skippin' out, that hain't our style. We own this place an' we mean to hold it, too. Thar—you've got your answer; how ye like it?"

"Better than you will in the end. All we've got to do is to take our time ontel you've starved into good sense ag'in. You see we've got the deadwood on ye. We can send out for bread and water—but you can't. Jist figger that up an' see how the sum comes out," chuckled the miner.

A pistol-shot replied—followed by a fierce curse. The keen eye of Little Volcano caught a glimpse of a red shirt through one of the rocks in the pile of stones, and instantly sent a bullet to feel its texture.

All parleying was now at an end. Several shots were interchanged, aim being taken at the little loop-holes or cracks, but apparently without material success. And, knowing that a chance shot might end all, the besieged lay close while keeping a good look-out.

And so the day wore on, Zimri keeping his tongue well limbered with stinging taunts and jeers, seeking to maden the enemy into risking all upon one bold rush; but without success. Either they had some better plan in view, or they were too thick-skinned to be stung as he hoped.

The sun passed its meridian, and still no change. Zimri was fuming and boiling over, declaring that if this lasted much longer he would break cover and clean out the lot himself, when Little Volcano pointed down the valley. A body of horse-men could just be discerned, and they were plainly coming up the valley. It would be hard to tell whether the besieged were most pleased or alarmed. Even if the new-comers should frighten the gamblers away—and from the stir among them it was plain that they also had made the discovery—the secret of the gold placer would no longer be theirs.

"Look! they mean business, whoever they are!" cried the boy miner, as the horsemen broke into a gallop.

"An' so do I!" grated Zimri, as his rifle cracked spitefully.

The gamblers had broken cover and were running at full speed toward the hills; but one would never reach them. Overtaken by the leaden missile, he plunged heavily forward, writhing in the throes of death.

"Hallo!" shouted the foremost rider, in Spanish, as he dashed up. "Who are you—friends or foes?"

"That's fer you to say—ef you be twenty to our one," undauntedly cried Zimri—but Little Volcano sprung forward.

"You should know my face, senor—"

With a glad cry Joaquín Murieta leaped from his horse and came forward, warmly greeting the boy miner. Zimri stood grimly by, while his comrade told the outlaw all that had occurred. Evidently he did not like the situation, and cast more than one anxious glance toward the rocks where the gamblers had disappeared.

"My men shall hunt them coyotes down—and then return here to help you secure your treasure," warmly cried the outlaw chief, motioning his men forward.

"No—there is no need of so much trouble. Now they have fled, my friend and I can manage very well," said the boy miner, a little coldly, for he, too, had not forgotten how his name had been coupled with the outlaw already.

"Very well—Joaquín Murieta is not one to thrust his aid where 'tis not welcome," a little sharply said the outlaw. "Forward, men! hunt down those dogs—don't let one escape to tell of what they have seen!" and he leaped to his saddle and spurred away, followed by his band.

"Ef he kin only do it!" muttered Zimri. "Ef

he only kin! But let one o' them cusses git back to Hard Luck, an' our chance won't be wuth a rotten aig!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

JACK HAYES RAKES DOWN THE POT.

It is not difficult to imagine what intense chagrin must have been felt by such a man as Sheriff Hayes at the double escape of Joaquín Murieta from Hard Luck, the headquarters of a strong force of men organized expressly for the purpose of killing him and exterminating his band of cutthroats. A more deadly insult could not have been offered him. Until this, he had been deemed invincible; and though, as a rule, Jack Hayes was a quiet, unassuming man, he prided himself not a little upon this reputation. It was not to be expected, then, that he should quietly submit to this double insult, and the Hard-Luckians knew that "the old man" meant business when he bade his company of Man-Hunters to prepare for a long and hard ride.

"Tain't none too soon, nuther," said Arkansas Jack to a chum, as they mustered before the Drew-Drop Inn. "They say Cap'n Harry Love hev tuk the trail 'long o' some twenty odd o' the boys he know'd in the greaser muss. Ef it's ti... we've got to work right piert ef we 'spect to finger any o' that head-money, you bet!"

Jack Gabriel led the way to Arroyo Cantura—the spot where he had had his first fight with Joaquín—but the game had flown, leaving no trail behind them, no sign save the coal ashes of their fire, the beaten ground where their tents had stood. Here and there the Man-Hunters rode—but it was like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. Information they had—too much of it, in fact. Nearly every man they met could tell them where Joaquín was likely to be found, and nimble tongues readily mapped out the course they were to follow—but the results were the same in each case: disappointment. The same in all, that is, but one. Four times they had been deceived by false information; the fifth time, after hearing all the dirty, greasy, tattered yet pompous and dignified Senor Don Something-or-other had to communicate, Jack Hayes nodded to Jack Gabriel, who coolly collared the Spaniard and unceremoniously seated him upon the cantle of his saddle. And when the end of the trail was reached, without sign of Murieta, the Man-Hunters rode quietly out of the valley; but behind them, dangling from the limb of an oak tree, remained their guide.

And yet, as it afterward proved, the wretched Spaniard had been perfectly sincere in his information, however he had gained it. Joaquín had intended to pause for the night in the very valley where the Spaniard died—had he not been drawn aside by the sound of rifle-shots.

The Man-Hunters were just finishing their morning meal, having given it more time than customary, as Hayes scarcely knew in which direction to ride next. The sharp challenge of their outpost called the attention of all to a little band of men who had just made their appearance upon the hillside. Though dirty, blood-stained and wayworn, the new-comers were readily recognized, and one—whose hand was in a sling, whose face was swathed in a bloody bandage—was drawn aside by Sheriff Hayes, who listened eagerly and with closest interest to his communication.

Boot and saddle was sounded—the men quickly mounted and fell in order, leaving the four wayfarers behind them as they rode rapidly away. Winding through the hills for several miles, Jack Hayes led the way into a narrow valley, long and irregular in outline.

"They's game ahead, boss!" cried Arkansas Jack, his eyes glowing as he pointed up the valley. "Look at the two-legged cusses split fer liver!"

"Easy, Jack—don't burn your powder before the time comes. Gentlemen," he added, turning toward his followers, "I think we've struck a lead at last—but mind; I'm going to work this job up my own way. You are not to touch a weapon until I give the word; remember that. I have my reasons, but if any gentleman don't think they are sufficient, I shall be most happy to convince him, after the show is over."

They were satisfied and said so; few persons who knew the sheriff's wonderful powers of argument, ever cared to differ with him—at least in open words.

As Arkansas Jack said, the game was afoot; but it did not make a long flight, only a few rods, then disappeared behind a pile of rocks. Toward these Hayes led his men, but when within one hundred yards a sharp voice bade him stand.

"Halt there! You needn't mind 'bout comin' no closter ontel you tell us what you want," was what the voice said.

"Don't act the fool, old man," retorted Hayes, but nevertheless he drew rein as the dark muzzle of a rifle covered him. "You'll gain nothing by it. Even if we meant you—far more than we do—how could you help yourselves—"

"You wouldn't come no fuder, an' a good chance o' your men wouldn't make the hull trip

here—that much we kin do, anyway; but—what do 'ee want, anyway?"

"We want you, Zimri Coon, and your partner—Little Volcano as he calls himself. If you will give yourself up quietly, so much the better for us all; if not—then we'll have to take you, alive if possible, but take you anyway."

"What have we done that you come here with a crowd as though hunting wild beasts?" cried Little Volcano, angrily.

"That you will learn in good time, if you don't know already. But I don't come here to talk. If you surrender, quietly, I promise you fair treatment and a square trial. If you are foolhardy enough to resist, so much the worse for you both," coolly uttered the sheriff, riding leisurely forward, followed at a little distance by his men.

"He'll keep his word—we must give in, little 'un," hastily muttered Zimri, to the boy miner. "I don't b'lieve they kin prove anythin' ag'in us." Then adding aloud, as he stepped outside the rock fort: "You've got the budge on us this time, boss. We'll take your word fer givin' us a fa'r show an' no favor—it's all we ax."

"You shall have it—I give you my word. I really believe you two are square men, clean through, or I should have acted a little differently; I'm better on the act than on the talk," laughed the sheriff.

"An' Jack Hayes is the only man I'd give up to, without knowin' somethin' more o' his reasons than this. But see here, cap'n—we've made a strike here, an' though we hain't got our papers jest yet, it'd be mighty hard to lose our claim by havin' it jumped while we're in limbo onder a mistake, now wouldn't it?"

"None of my men shall interfere, and if, after you have cleared yourselves—as I hope and trust you will—there are any interlopers, I will see that you have justice."

"Good enough! Then mebbe you'll take charge of a little dust what we've managed to scrape together. I reckon thar's enough to pay fer totin' it," and with a self-satisfied chuckle, Zimri Coon unearthed their goodly store of gold.

The Man-Hunters crowded around with exclamations of wonder, envious looks and some black thoughts; but Sheriff Hayes held them under good control, and what he ordered was promptly obeyed. The gold was secured upon one horse, the prisoners mounted behind two of the men, and then Hayes addressed his men.

He said the two prisoners must be taken back to Hard Luck, and there closely guarded until his return; six men would be sufficient for that purpose. They were to be held responsible for the safety of both prisoners and gold. Himself and the main body were to press on in pursuit of Joaquín, who had passed through this valley only the evening previous. This said, the six men were drawn by lot, and the party divided, Arkansas Jack being placed in charge of the captives.

It was evident that Jack Gabriel meant to run no unnecessary risk. His captives had already surrendered their arms; now he caused their arms to be bound firmly behind their backs, and as they were placed *en coupe*, a stout thong was passed around their waists, and that of the man behind whom they were seated.

"The time will come when you fellows will have to pay big for this," muttered Little Volcano, in a strained voice, but the Man-Hunters only laughed at the threat as they rode on, heading for their last night's camp, where they found the four men still awaiting their return.

It was a bitter blow to the prisoners, this meeting with Sleepy George and his comrades, and more than once they cursed their folly in not levanting while they had the chance, satisfying themselves with the moderate fortune they had already gathered.

Now that the guardians of the placer were in bonds, Sleepy George and his chums were eager to go their way—but that was not to be. Jack Hayes had given his orders, and Gabriel meant to execute them at all hazards.

"You're goin' 'long o' us, back to town, my lad—them's the cap'n's orders, an' I'm goin' to see they're follered or bu'st somethin'. You've set this thing goin', an' now you've got to keep up your eend, or they'll be a funeral mighty quick—an' you'll be fust mourner, too," bluntly quoth Jack from Arkansas.

Sleepy George knew his man, and so, making the best of a bad bargain, submitted. The back trail was taken up, and though the party were forced to travel slowly, Hard Luck was finally reached. Before entering town, Jack had a private word with the gamblers, stating that if each and every one of them were not promptly on hand whenever wanted, he would take it as a personal insult, and act accordingly.

Their arrival created an immense sensation in Hard Luck. Every one crowded around, eager to view the prisoners, and to learn for what crime they had been arrested. All this was bitter enough to Little Volcano, but doubly so was the sight of Mary Morton, a witness of his disgrace. After that he cared little for the rest, moving and looking more like an animated corpse than aught else.

They were placed in a stout log cabin, their arms all unbound, but stout handcuffs were substituted, though their legs were left free. The gold was unloaded and placed in the same building, Jack Gabriel insisting on their watching the whole affair, and obtaining their assurance that none of the gold was missing. Then he entered the prison with them, and the door was closed and secured.

"You see," he said, apologetically, "I'm held 'sponsible fer you two fellers an' that gold, or I wouldn't think o' 'trudin'. You kin jest play I ain't no more'n a log o' wood, an' I giv' my word I won't breathe one word o' anythin' I may hear in here. Ef thar's anythin' you want as I kin git, jest spit it out, an' you shell hev it."

"I reckon they'll give us grub an' drink enough to keep from starvin'," said Zimri. "But ef you will—what is it we're brung here fer, anyway?"

"Wal, it's only fa'r you should know, I reckon," replied Jack, contemplatively. "The fust charge is b'longin' to Joaquin's band—"

"A cussed lie!" hotly cried Coon, his eyes glowing.

"In course it is—you'd be a blame fool fer sayin' anythin' else," coolly returned Gabriel. "All you've got to do is to prove it, ye know. Then thar's that gold yender. It's said you bounced the fellers as really owned it, shot two on 'em down from ambush, an' driv' t'others away—you an' Joaquin an' his gang. Them's the other charges—murder an' stealin' gold as wasn't yourn."

The prisoners stared at each other in mute horror. Could this be possible? It seemed like a dream.

"When'll we hev a chance to meet these lies?" at length asked Zimri Coon.

"Soon's the boss comes home—an' that 'll be to-morrow, I reckon. You'll be giv' a fa'r show afore Judge Lynch," was the cool reply, as Gabriel lighted his pipe.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JUDGE LYNCH PRESIDES.

ALL business was at a standstill in Hard Luck. Even Pet Pete, of the Dew-Drop Inn, found himself completely deserted, just as he was coming to the intensely thrilling point of a sketch from real life—suggested by the event about to take place that day—when the stentorian voice of Arkansaw Jack was heard in the distance, and an immediate stampede was the result. For miles around the news had spread, and nearly every digger within fifty miles had made it a point to visit Hard Luck to see the show. It was not every day that such an opportunity offered—a "real court" held among the mountains.

Sheriff Hayes and his company of Man-Hunters had returned from a hard but unsuccessful ride after Joaquin Murieta, and after some discussion, pro and con, it was resolved to give the two prisoners the benefit of a speedy and impartial trial. The witnesses were ready. Though, doubtless, Sleepy George and his crew would far rather have been employed in clearing out the gold placer, the pointed hint given them had kept them quiescent.

The court was held in open air, beneath the spreading oak from the shelter of which Little Volcano had first awakened from his brief dream of love. Long Tom had kindly furnished one of his green baize-covered tables. Beside this the judge is seated; Sheriff Jack Hayes being elected *viva voce*. He is in his shirt-sleeves, his head is bare; the day is close and sultry. Before him lie pen, ink and paper. At his elbow stands a bowl of Pet Pete's best punch, and a box of cigars. Hard Luck resolved to do the thing up in style—and had not the sheriff firmly objected, the table would have equaled any bar in town.

After much discussion, the preliminaries had been arranged. The greatest difficulty was in selecting a suitable jury. Everybody in or near Hard Luck had already judged the case and pronounced for or against the prisoners. But even this difficulty was surmounted by Jack Gabriel, whose wit seemed sharpened by the emergency. He rode away at the head of a dozen men, returning at midnight with the jury. Whenever he found a man who had not yet heard of the arrest, that was sufficient; he was mounted behind a rider, forbidden to open his mouth under penalty of being gagged. In this manner the required number were collected, and kept in solitary confinement until the hour of the trial, then produced by Gabriel with honest triumph.

Judge Lynch—late Sheriff Hayes—cast a glance over the motley crowd. It was truly a curious scene. Perhaps two hundred souls were present, including nearly every nationality under the sun. The majority were sturdy diggers, though a few of the softer sex were visible; several Indians, a few "Johns," a black or two. The jury squatted upon a log, some scowling as they remembered their unguarded claims, others careless, a few calmly attentive, resolved to do their duty to the best of their judgment. A little to the right stood a couple of chairs; in these were seated the prisoners, unarmed and

unbound. There was little danger of their escaping—too many revolvers were visible.

Judge Lynch pulled strongly at his half-smoked cigar for a moment or two, as if to insure its keeping alight, then rapped upon the table before him. Instantly all was silent as the grave, save for the faint rustling among the leaves overhead.

"Gentlemen," began the judge, speaking in clear, well-measured accents. "Gentlemen, there is no need of my telling you the purpose of this gathering, more than to say that I mean to give the prisoners a fair show, and see that they receive justice, whether they are innocent or guilty. I don't pretend to know much about court business, as it is carried on in the big cities, where, I am told, a handful of gold will change any man's opinions; but this much I do know: if the evidence which we are soon to hear proves the prisoners guilty, beyond all reasonable doubt, they shall receive a just punishment; but if the evidence fails to show this—and you are the judge of that, gentlemen of the jury—then they shall go free from here, honored and respected."

"The charges against them are three in number: robbery, murder, and being friends to or members of Joaquin's band. Now, Mr. Gabriel, you will proceed to call the witnesses."

"One moment, your honor," cried little Volcano, rising to his feet. "You say we are to receive a fair trial; that is all we ask. But are we to have no counsel—no one to speak for us?"

"The evidence will do that, young man. Still, you are at liberty to ask the witnesses any questions you choose, and if proper ones they shall be answered."

Sleepy George was the first witness put upon the stand, and, after being sworn, began his evidence. It rolled glibly enough from his tongue, and the lies were well cemented together with bits of truth. Little Volcano listened intently, taking an occasional note, but making no interruption.

There is no need to follow the gambler's exact words; to do so would employ much space which can be better occupied. The main substance can be given in a few lines.

The court would remember his old friend and pard, Chinny Jeff, who unfortunately died with the jim-jams, some weeks previously, and soon after returning from a prospecting tour. Everybody knew that Jeff had brought back plenty of gold, that he often declared he had struck it uncommon rich while gone. But he died, and made the witness his heir as part payment for his assiduous attention and nursing during his fatal illness. Among his property was found a chart, giving directions where to find a wonderfully rich placer of gold. The witness, after considerable trouble, made up a party of five men, all of whom he could trust, and went to find the placer. Though unsuspected then, the prisoner had dogged them, and watching their chance, had attacked them in the night, killing Laughing Dick and Butcher Ben. Taken by surprise, witness and his surviving comrades retreated to the hills, leaving their gold behind them. When day came, they saw their mistake, and attacked the prisoners, but before they could regain their own, a strong force, led by Joaquin Murieta, the outlaw, came up, and, together with the prisoners, hunted them through the hills until witness and pards finally escaped them.

"Will your honor please ask the witness one question?" said Little Volcano, as Sleepy George concluded his evidence. "The witness says a chart was bequeathed him by his friend; can he produce that chart for inspection?"

"You know I can't," snarled Sleepy George. "You stole it, 'long o' the gold an' stuff."

"Ask him, your honor, to describe this chart. What language was it written in—with pencil or ink—and what was the name signed to it, if any?"

"The questions are fair ones—witness, you must answer," promptly added Judge Lynch.

Sleepy George looked uneasy, and glanced toward the spot where Long Tom stood. This was more than he had calculated upon. Still he could not escape answering. The paper was written with ink, in English; if there was any name signed to it, he had never noticed it; did not think there was any signature.

"I have no more questions to ask, your honor, at present. Perhaps you had better take charge of this paper for me."

Judge Lynch glanced at the paper, and his brows lowered, but only for a moment. Then he bade Arkansaw Jack proceed.

The Preacher, Ham-fat Zack and Cockeyed Waddel were called in succession, and though each man had been kept separate, their evidence fully corroborated that of their leader, Sleepy George, and the prisoners saw that the evidence was not without its effect upon the jury.

Long Tom gave in his evidence in a clear, straightforward manner. He told how the prisoners visited his rooms, for the purpose of playing; that a quarrel ensued, when Little Volcano drew a knife and struck Sleepy George; that a stranger took sides with the prisoners, and who was then recognized as Joaquin Murieta; that the three effected their escape together, nor had

they been seen in town again until brought in captives.

The next witness was a big, raw-boned specimen of humanity, who gave his name as William Blazern, better known as Bill Blazes, from the bottoms of Grand river, Missouri. Little Volcano smiled faintly as he recognized the "waugh-hoss," and whose appearance time had not much improved. His hay-colored hair seemed even more sunburnt and frowzy; his face redder, his eyes more bleared and watery, though now ornamented with twin circles of purple bruised flesh and sundry scratches; his clothing more greasy and ragged, if possible, than when Little Volcano left him upon the mountain-side.

"Witness, you will tell the jury what you know of the prisoner; make your story brief and to the point, and remember that you are now upon oath," said the judge.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout the old feller, jedge," said Bill Blazes, scratching his unkempt head; "but I kin tell somethin' 'bout the little cuss—I know 'im from a to amperwand, the pizen, or'nary—"

"Keep to your evidence, sir," impatiently cried Judge Lynch. "We want none of your blackguardism—nothing but facts."

"That's a fact, anyhow," muttered Bill Blazes, but then hastily resuming: "I know the pris'ner—the little 'un. I know him fer a durned, no-count thief, an' one o' Walk-in's band—I do fer a scan'alous fact! I'll tell ye how 'twas, boss. Ye see, this Walk-in, as he calls himself, hes bin rampagin' the kentry right smart, a-cuttin' up the devil generally, 'ntel I thinks, thinks I—it's a durned, all-fired shame—I did so! I knowed thar was a big reward out fer his head, an' so I made up my mind to airt it. I laid all my plans—picked out a smart gang o' fellers, an' tuck to the trail. We run the varmint to airt at last, an' would 'a' lagged him, only I—it runs in our fambly, gentlemen—was tuck sick. I was struck plum blind fer a time. The boys was red-hot, an' wouldn't wait fer me—so on they runs, an' gits flaxed out the wust kind."

"Wall, boss, I was layin' thar at the foot o' a tree, when the pris'ner—the little cuss—kem up, 'long o' three other fellers, one on 'em no less than Walk-in himself. I was weaker'n a sick kitten, 'nd couldn't do nothin'. They pitched onto me, pounded me 'most dead, robbed me—I hed nigh onto three thousin' dollars in dust—stole my weapons an' then puckacheed—"

At this point an interruption came, as startling as it was unexpected. During the evidence of the "waugh-hoss," Arkansaw Jack seemed unusually restless and nervous, but at last he could no longer control himself and strode forward to the witness-stand, one hand closing upon the Missourian's shoulder.

"Your honor," he said, excitedly, "it hain't my style to kick up a muss whar I've no business, but when a dirty, lyin' cuss like this comes cut in daylight an' tries to swar away a man's life, I can't help it—keep still, you varmint! or I'll send you to blazes, hot foot!" he growled, as Bill Blazes sought to free himself and slink away.

"What do you mean, Mr. Gabriel?" demanded the judge.

"Jest this. This feller *did* raise a comp'ny, of which I was one. When we found we was righ our game, he turned tail—wanted to make us back out! We kicked him down the hill, an' piled in ourselves. As fer his three thousin' dollars, I *know* he didn't hev three cents' wuth o' gold in his clo'es—an' I kin prove every word I say. As fer Joaquin, he was fightin' us, as I kin swar on my Bible cath, as only fer him, I'd 'a' wiped out Three-fingered Jack that day. Knowin' all this, how could I stan' still an' listen to sech durned lies—"

"We thank you, Mr. Gabriel, for your service in exposing such a malicious perjurer. As for you, Bill Blazes, you shall not entirely escape. Gentlemen of the jury—is he guilty or not guilty, of attempting to swear the prisoner's life away falsely?"

"Guilty, in course—the pizen cuss!" growled the burly foreman.

"Then I sentence him to receive fifty lashes, soundly laid on, to be kicked out of camp, and I adjourn this court to see that the penalty is fully carried out!"

In vain Bill Blazes protested his innocence. He was dragged away to the hillside where stout withes would be handy, and there the punishment was inflicted. Stripped naked, he was bound to a tree-trunk, and Arkansaw Jack wielded the switches with a willing arm, Judge Lynch audibly counting the strokes until the full number were bestowed. But so terribly had the wretch suffered—sinking to the ground a bleeding, quivering mass when he was released—that the second part of the punishment was remitted. He was ordered to leave the town, never to return under penalty of receiving a like visitation; then the court retraced its steps—to make a startling discovery.

Little Volcano sat quietly in his chair, just as he had been left when the crowd rushed toward the hillfoot, but Zimri Coon was missing. Neither was he among the crowd.

He had vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PAINFUL INTERVIEW.

JUDGE, jury and spectators stared in mute amazement at the vacant chair, scarce able to believe their eyes. It did not seem possible that the prisoner could have stolen away unobserved by at least one pair out of the many—yet such had been the case. He was not among the crowd, nor could any glimpse of him be obtained along the hillside, up or down the valley, nor yet toward the town.

"How is this—what does it all mean?" cried Jack Hayes, addressing the boy miner, who was quietly smiling at their consternation. "Where's he gone to?"

"I suppose he got tired sitting here listening to his life being sworn away by a nest of such infernal scoundrels—you flogged one of the most decent of the lot just now—and so he thought he'd take a walk for the good of his health."

"And you—why didn't you go, too?"

"Tisn't my style. I've never yet turned tail to an enemy—it's too late in the day to begin now. I'll either leave this a free and unsuspected man, or you'll have the blood of an innocent being upon your hands. If I do win free, there'll be some black and heavy scores wiped out."

"Never mind that now—you are not cleared yet. Jack Gabriel—you will take the prisoner back to the jail and keep him under your own eyes until he is wanted. As for you, boys," he added, addressing the excited crowd, "there's one hundred dollars waiting for the man who brings back that old fellow. Don't hurt him more than you can help, for he isn't armed—but bring him back. Half a dozen of you strike off over the hill on foot—the rest of you get your horses and come to me for instructions—away!"

The sharply-spoken words were not without effect. From being wildly excited, running to and fro and making confusion worse confounded, they settled down to business in an instant, a dozen of them starting up the hillside, here too steep and broken for horsemen, others rushing for their horses and putting themselves under command of Jack Hayes.

"It's just as well you didn't make a break, 'long o' your pard, young feller," observed Arkansaw Jack, as he escorted Little Volcano back to his prison. "The old fool 'll be brung back in less 'n a-hour, an' his running away will only prejudyce the jury ag'in' him."

"He asked me to go with him, but I didn't think it worth while," replied the boy miner, as he entered the log cabin. "There's nothing been proved against us yet, nor can there be unless false swearing can outweigh the truth. But I owe you one, friend, for exposing that ass—if I don't say much, I think all the more."

"You hain't got nothin' to thank me for," was the blunt reply. "I owed the pizen war-mint one, an' I paid it, too—'twasn't out o' love fer you. They say you've been mighty thick with Joaquin; they say they kin prove it. Ef that's so—ef you do belong to his gang—I'll be the fust one to hist away on the rope an' laugh at the show you make a-dancin' on nothin'."

"Thank you for nothing! I don't think you'll have that pleasure very soon, if there's any justice to be had. If I had been guilty, I wouldn't be here now, when I had such a good chance of making my legs save my neck. Now, if you have no objections, I'll take a little snooze—I didn't sleep much last night."

Arkansaw Jack lighted his pipe and sat down upon the floor, leaning against the slab door, listening for the sounds of triumph he doubted not would speedily announce the capture of the fugitive. But hour after hour elapsed without the expected signals, and his face began to lengthen as confidence gradually turned to doubt. If Zimri Coon should escape for good—what a bitter disgrace it would be to them all—and he had been playing such a prominent part—he would never hear the last of it.

Poor Jack Gabriel! little did he dream of the fate the future had in store for him. His days were already numbered—his earthly trail was drawing to an end. He was to add one more link to the terrible chain of crime and bloodshed that still marks the footsteps of the terrible Joaquin and even more ruthless Manuel Garcia.

The sun was sinking below the tree-tops upon the western range, when a timid knock at the cabin door aroused Jack Gabriel from the reverie into which he had fallen. A low, trembling voice replied to his challenge—the tones of a woman, beyond a doubt—and casting one glance toward the sleeping captive, Jack opened the door and stepped forth. He instantly recognized the slight figure of Mary Morton, and doffed his hat with rude politeness.

"You wanted to see me, miss?" he asked, with a voice that would persist in wabbling a little; bold as he was, Jack was no hero in the presence of beauty.

"Oh, sir—you will be kind? You will let me see—see the—the prisoner?" faltered Mary. "You may think it a strange request, but I—I love him so dearly!"

"It's ag'in' orders, miss—the boss would r'ar up an' kick the hull gable-end off o' me ef he

knowed it. I'd like to please ye, but you see jest how I'm fixed," said Jack, uneasily.

"There can be no harm—he is innocent, I am sure. Please let me see him—if only for one short minute!" pleaded the maiden, her trembling hand touching Jack's horny paw.

To do him justice Gabriel tried hard to resist, but he could not. Down in his big bosom was a heart, tender and soft toward anything in the shape of woman. It melted immediately, though he sought to make his voice sound even rougher and sterner than usual, as he replied:

"Yas—you want to play some trick, so he kin slip off like t'other feller did—that's what's the matter."

"No, indeed—indeed—"

"You promise, honest Injun, you won't give him no weepens—no pizen nur nothin'? You won't try to play no lugs onto me if I let you inside thar?"

"I promise you, by my mother's grave!" was the earnest reply.

"Then I'll trust you—I couldn't help it, ef I was to try till the cows come home. You 'mind me of my little gal—she's dead now. Thar—don't say no more. Go in—when you want to come out, jest knock on the door."

He opened the door, and Mary entered. She saw the boy miner lying upon the floor, still sleeping, his face pale and careworn. At that sight all hesitation vanished, all shyness was gone; she only remembered that she loved him better far than life itself, and gliding forward she knelt beside him, pressing her lips to his forehead.

The gentle touch awakened him. His eyes opened, and his dream seemed realized. For the moment he only knew that she whom he loved with an ardor and intensity far beyond his years, was there beside him—and then they were clasped in each other's arms.

But only for a few moments did this transport last. That black, never-to-be-forgotten night recurred to the boy miner's memory, and a shudder of aversion passed through his frame as he released the maiden and sprang to his feet. Mary looked up into his face, bewildered at this sudden change. And then a hot blush suffused her face as she murmured:

"You are angry with me for coming here?"

"Not angry—only I must confess I am surprised to see you here—alone," replied the boy miner, speaking hard and sternly, the more so, perhaps, from finding it such an effort to speak at all.

"There was no one to come with me. Aunt was busy—and I couldn't wait, I wanted to see you so much," faltered Mary.

"To ask me what I have done with your lover, no doubt," bitterly added Little Volcano.

"I—I don't understand you?" murmured Mary, arising.

"Indeed!" sneered the boy miner. "Do you wish me to speak out?" Then, as Mary looked at him in silent surprise, he added, in a hard, almost insulting tone: "Very well; I will speak plainly, and if the words hurt you, do not blame me: You must know why I am here; among other things for killing or helping to kill two members of a party that followed us for the purpose of murdering and robbing us. One of them men was known as—Laughing Dick."

"I know—I heard it all—I sent you a note, warning you of danger," murmured Mary.

"I said one of the men who was killed was named Laughing Dick," repeated the boy miner with emphasis. "You may have heard of him—possibly?"

"Yes—he was one of the band—I have seen him."

Little Volcano stared in amazement. Could it be that he had made a mistake? No—that was impossible.

"I know you have seen him—I know that only too well!"

"What do you mean? There is some dreadful mistake—"

"So I said, on that night. Do you remember that afternoon—when we were together in the dining-room? When you told me you loved me—better than life itself?"

"That is the question I should ask you," sadly replied the maiden. "My being here is a sufficient answer—but you?"

"Ay! there is a change, isn't there?" and he laughed harshly. "I was a silly, blind fool, then. But my eyes were quickly opened. My God! how happy I was that day! I could repeat every one of your words—recall every look and smile—I was in heaven upon earth! But that same night—Do you remember it? You were beside the spring—a man's arms were around your waist—he kissed you—and I saw it all—all! You hide your head—I do not wonder—"

"You saw me, then?" gasped the maiden tremblingly.

"Yes—and I recognized him, too. I paid my debt in full—if you want him, go ask the wolves and the buzzards!"

"I do not understand you—I saw him, alive and well, not an hour ago—"

"Bah! can the dead walk? I killed him, I tell you—and was only sorry that he didn't have a dozen lives that I might—"

"Who are you speaking of—what is his name?"

"It was Laughing Dick—the gambler—the thief—"

"Thank God!" cried Mary, joyfully. "Then you don't know—you thought it was a lover whom I met that night?"

"It would seem so, to a blind man with spectacles on," harshly laughed Little Volcano. "Those soft words, those long-drawn kisses—that looked lover-like, certainly!"

"I never spoken a dozen words to that man—Laughing Dick. I never met him except as he came in to dinner with the rest. I never had a lover, until—until—"

"Will you tell me *who* it was you met that night at the spring, then?" interrupted the boy miner.

"I cannot—I dare not—do not ask me, please."

"You say that it was not Laughing Dick—that you never met nor spoke a word of love to him. You say more, that you never had a lover. And yet you *did* meet a man after dark that night, beside the spring, for I saw you. You let him hug you, let him kiss you, and once, at least—for I saw it with my own eyes—you kissed him in return. I may be very dull and stupid—but I cannot reconcile this with your words. I admit that I loved you—I love you wholly and entirely—I would have died for you, and counted myself richly repaid with one kind look—one kiss. Yet my love did not make me blind—I know what I saw. If you can explain it away, I will bless you—I will ask your pardon upon my knees. Can you explain it? Tell me who that man was—tell me what connection there is between you?"

"I cannot—I cannot!" sobbed Mary, covering her face.

"You mean you *will* not! Very well. I was a fool for even dreaming of such a thing—for thinking you *could* explain it away. But that's gone now. My eyes are opened for good—"

"As God hears me, there was nothing wrong—I was never false to you, even in thought! You will believe me?"

"When you tell me what I ask—never, unless," stonily replied Little Volcano, turning away from her.

The maiden sunk to the floor with a wailing cry, sobbing as though her heart would break. The cry was echoed from without, and then the door opened, and Mrs. Champion entered followed by Arkansaw Jack. Mary arose, and, after one appealing look toward the boy miner, she took her aunt's arm and left the prison.

Arkansaw Jack watched them out of sight, then closed and fastened the door, with a good deal of emphasis, growling:

"I don't know what they may be atween you an' her—nor what it was brung her here; but this much I *will* say! A feller as 'll make a little angel-gal like that cry fit to bust her heart, ain't fit to live 'mong white men—an' if ever I git the chauce to pull on a rope as is 'round your neck, ef I don't shout glory hallelujeram! then I'm a nigger—so thar!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

LITTLE VOLCANO "STREADS HIMSELF."

TIME dragged slowly and heavily with the prisoner, who now had no hope to cheer him. With the vanishing of Mary Morton, it seemed as though the last link that bound him to earth had been loosened. Through all his mad jealousy and dark thoughts, there had nevertheless been a vein of hope that everything might be cleared away—the seeming mystery explained, and when the final blow came, it descended with redoubled force. Boy though he was, in years, at least, the wild, independent life he had led for years had developed his nature wonderfully, and he loved Mary Morton with every fiber of his fiery, nervous nature. Those hours were of absolute torture, though he persisted in declaring himself doubly fortunate in making the discovery before it was too late.

Only once did he arouse himself from the gloomy fit that had fallen upon him: that was when Arkansaw Jack came to relieve the guard. The giant seemed greatly excited, and drawing close to Little Volcano, whispered rapidly in his ear for some minutes. The boy miner thanked him warmly, but then relapsed into the old mood—almost stupor.

The hours passed on, rolling up into days, still nothing was heard of the missing man. A number of the pursuers came back, empty-handed, but as a general thing only to recruit themselves, once more taking the trail, well provided with rations. No word came from Sheriff Hayes, until early on the morning of the fourth day. Then he rode into town, haggard and way-worn, his horse scarce able to walk, his followers, if anything, in still harder case. There was no need of asking questions. A blind man could have told the truth. Never once had they set eyes upon the fugitive, never once even struck his trail. It seemed as though Zimri Coon must have called to his aid the spirits of the air to have vanished without leaving the faintest trace of his passage.

Sheriff Hayes resolved to lose no more time, and, scarce waiting to take bite or sup, he called a meeting and declared his intention of proceeding with the trial of the remaining prisoner. The jury was still at hand, though Arkansaw

Jack had had considerable trouble with several of them, who had left paying claims entirely unprotected behind them at such short notice. Only by swearing that he would shoot the first man who attempted to leave before the boss's return, could he keep them there. Others were more complaisant, spending most of their time at Long Tom's gambling-tables.

"It's a dubious outlook for you, I'm 'feared, young fellow," said Jack Gabriel, thoughtfully, after receiving notice to hold his prisoner ready when wanted. "The boss is wuss than a b'ar with a sore head—the jury is a durned sight wuss, an' they mean to rush the thing through in a hurry. Ef they'd ketched your pard it'd be a heap easier fer you, 't ennysrate."

"Let them do their worst, old man—it'll be all the same a thousand years from now. Only—I don't like to be beaten even in a brace game, and I'll fight it through the best I know how. There comes the word now, I guess."

The boy miner was right. A messenger came bidding Arkansaw Jack produce his prisoner—that the court was awaiting him. Gabriel hesitated, and fairly blushed as he thrust one hand into his pocket, where something clinked softly. Little Volcano smiled faintly and held out his hands.

"Slip them on, pard—don't think I blame you, only one would think that, after my action t'other day, my word of honor would be sufficient."

"So it would with me—more than enough, lad—but what kin I do? I told you the boss was sharp set," muttered Gabriel, as he clasped the handcuffs around the boy miner's wrists.

The court was awaiting them, at the old spot beneath the wide-spreading oak tree. The judge did look stern—while more than one of the jury seemed fairly wolfish. The crowd—far less numerous than that of the first day—evidently shared the same feelings, and vindictive looks greeted the prisoner from every side, while low muttered threats and curses came to his ears from all sides. Instead of intimidating him, the effect was directly opposite. Casting a proudly-defiant glance around, the boy miner resolved to fight bravely and stubbornly for the life that had, only a few hours before, seemed utterly valueless.

There was little time cut to waste. The judge arose and rapidly, though clearly and justly, gave an epitome of the evidence already given in. On concluding he asked the prisoner if he had omitted anything. Little Volcano expressed his complete satisfaction.

Several witnesses were called, sworn, and gave in their evidence, but the testimony is scarcely worth recording in full. A great part of it was merely hearsay, the only direct portions being in regard to the actions of the prisoner at the time when Joaquin rode through the town on the Sunday when the Man-Hunters were first organized.

With this the prosecution ended their testimony and rested their case. The judge asked the prisoner what defense he had to offer.

"I have a good deal to say, your honor, but I will not waste more of your time than I can help. I could wish that these useful ornaments were removed, but I do not ask it, as your guard is so small," with a quiet glance around at the crowd of scowling faces. "As the first of my witnesses let the man called Sleepy George take the stand."

"I'm a witness ag'inst him," protested the bummer, but his protest was cut short by Arkansaw Jack bundling him forward.

"You will please repeat your story of the chart to the gold placer. Tell the jury everything connected with it," said Little Volcano.

Sleepy George obeyed as Gabriel gave him a warning punch in the ribs. His evidence was nearly the same as that already recorded. Then the prisoner questioned him closely as to the general shape and appearance of the paper. The bummer stumbled through as best he could, his uneasiness by no means lessened as he caught the cold, glittering eye of the judge riveted upon him.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the prisoner, "you have heard this man's evidence. He has described the chart which he claims as his property, and which he swears I and my friend stole from him. He has given evidence, too, as to where this gold placer is situated, has named the landmarks with sufficient clearness for you to recognize them. Now I recall to your memory the fact that I, on the first day, handed his honor the disputed chart; he has it now. Please remember what the witness has sworn; that the writing is with ink and in the English language; that he believed there was no name signed to it, or if there was that he had overlooked it. Now, your honor, will you please pass the paper over to the gentlemen of the jury?"

The chart was passed over, and eagerly examined. It was written with a lead pencil, in Spanish, and across the face of the chart, in letters full half an inch long was the name of Joaquin Murieta. Sleepy George saw that he had made a slip, and hastily cried out:

"They's some trick in it—that hain't the paper I had."

"Shet up ontel you're spoken to!" growled Arkansaw, adroitly knocking up the bummer's

jaw with a force that made his teeth rattle and the tears to come into his eyes.

"You're right as to what you say, young man," said the foreman, coldly. "But it's mighty queer evidence to put in fer one as stands 'cused o' bein' one o' Joaquin's gang."

"All in good time, my friend; perhaps that point can be explained also, if you are patient. Your honor," added the boy miner, "for what I now have to say, I wish to be put on my oath. I know it is not regular, but it will match well with what has preceded. If you will hear what I have to say, I am willing to take my chances. In no other way can I explain the chain of accidents which has put me in this uncomfortable position."

"You shall have every chance we can give you," replied the judge. "We are not assassins; we only wish to get at the truth."

Little Volcano was sworn, then proceeded with his story.

He briefly ran over his coming to Hard Luck, with the events which decided him to go prospecting alone for a claim, in preference to choosing one near the regular mines. Then he tersely described his adventure with the runaway horse and what followed.

"I had not the faintest suspicion then, of their identity, and yet, had I known the truth, I might have acted the same. The lady—for lady she was, beyond all doubt—was seriously injured, we feared fatally. The only chance for her life was in procuring assistance at the earliest possible moment. What could I do, as a man with a heart in my breast? Just what I did do—just what any and every man present would have done. I assisted them as far as I was able. We carried her to the valley where his band rendezvoused. Then, for the first time, I knew that my companions were Joaquin Murieta and his wife. Three-fingered Jack recognized me, and attempted to take my life—you know that he was one of those who stopped the up-coach last month, when I helped to drive them away. Joaquin saved my life then, and bade me follow him. I could do nothing else. If I had attempted to leave then, I should have been followed and murdered. It was while his wife was being attended to that he told me the story of his life. It may have been exaggerated—I know nothing about that; I only know that it affected me strangely at the time. He showed me that his whole life was wrapped up in the welfare of his wife, and, to prove that he was not ungrateful, he gave me that chart, first swearing that there was no blood upon it, that it had been honestly come by. I took it, as any man would have done. At that moment there came an alarm—the camp was attacked; you all know the result. I had no choice but to leave as best I could. I couldn't fight with Joaquin, nor against him, as I was situated. I escaped, and while the fight was still going on I met Bill Blazes. He insulted me—I knocked him down and went my way. I found my partner, and told him everything. We were examining the chart, and discussing it, when we discovered an eavesdropper. That eavesdropper was none other than Sleepy George. What he overheard there is all he ever knew about that chart, but it was enough to cause us all this trouble. We tried to throw him off the track by advertising a lost paper, but in vain. Then came the row at the house of Long Tom. It was a put-up job to get hold of the chart, by double-banking me. It failed, though I was knocked senseless. We slipped off that night for our placer. They followed us. They stole up in the dark, but we were on guard. They fired the first shot; we returned it, and in self-defense killed two men. They besieged us, but that day Joaquin came up and drove them off. We never asked his help, nor could we refuse it. He rode away, and left us to ourselves. What followed, you all know as well as I. This, your honor, and gentlemen of the jury, is a true and faithful story of what you call my crimes, so help me God!"

"Have you no other witnesses to call?" asked the judge.

"None, your honor. You have heard everything that bears upon the case—except one thing."

"Is it of importance? The day is passing, and our time is of importance," a little sharply asked the judge.

"I consider it of the greatest importance, your honor, since, in all probability, my life depends upon it."

"Very well, what is it?"

"I am not entirely satisfied with the jury—" "That cannot be helped now; the evidence is all in—"

"I must ask leave to make a brief statement, then," quietly added Little Volcano. "I can prove that two of the members have taken money as pay for bringing me in guilty."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WAITING FOR THE VERDICT.

LIKE a bombshell falling into a sleeping camp, came this bold assertion of the prisoner; for a moment the judge, jury and spectators stared in mute amazement—but then came changes. The burly foreman of the jury arose, his broad

face fairly glowing, his voice half-smothered with rage. But a quiet motion from the judge quieted him.

Through this little bit of by-play, Little Volcano had been making good use of his eyes. He saw one pale, handsome face grow still whiter, and fancied he could hear the bitter hissing oath that really came from beneath the drooping mustache. He saw two of the jurymen interchange swift glances, and move uneasily upon their seats as though they were growing uncomfortably warm. This much he saw and noted before the voice of Judge Lynch broke the almost painful silence.

"You have made a serious charge, prisoner—a very serious charge, and it's only right to tell you that it will only prejudice your own case unless you can prove your assertion, beyond all doubt. If you have made it only with a view of gaining time, you had better withdraw it at once, while there is yet time."

"I have no wish to withdraw anything," quickly replied the boy miner. "What I have said I can prove; and I stand ready to do so, if you insist. Though I can point out the guilty men, together with the man who has promised—if indeed they do not carry the blood-money in their pockets at this moment—them a certain sum if they will hold out until I am brought in guilty of enough to insure my death, yet I hold no deep grudge against them, since they are little more than blind tools in the hands of a cowardly assassin. Though I can ruin them forever in the sight of all honest men, I would rather not—unless I am forced to do so. If your honor will agree, I will prove my charge by a witness to whom none of you can object. This done, I am willing to rest my case and abide by your honor's decision—if you say guilty, I will quietly submit, though innocent of any intentional crime."

"I hain't got the gift o' gab like he hes," blurted forth the foreman of the jury; "but I reckon he means he wants the jury discharged. That won't work. Ef what he says is so, thar's some pizen mean cusses in our crowd, an' now he's got to p'int 'em out. Ef we're turned out 'thout that, every durned galoot amorg us 'll be 'spected by some fool or 'nuther. I say—let him prove his words!"

"Your motives may be good ones, prisoner," said the judge, "but if your charge is true, it would be rank injustice to ten innocent men, were we to do as you say. You must go on and prove your words."

"Very well; as my first witness, I call Long Tom."

This announcement created not a little surprise, for all knew that there was little goodwill between the two men. The most surprised was probably Arkansaw Jack, but after a moment his puzzled look changed to a broad grin, and he started toward the gambler, who was gradually edging his way out of the crowd. Long Tom visibly shrunk as the heavy hand of Gabriel rested upon his shoulder, and he made a motion as though to draw a weapon.

"Kinder easy, mister man," said Jack, his brawny right arm stiffening by his side as he spoke. "Them tricks won't do here. You're wanted fer a minnit, an' I reckon you'll hev to go."

"I know nothing about the matter—why does the fool pitch on me? He only wants to gain time—"

Arkansaw Jack did not wait to hear the protest, but led the unwilling witness up to the stand, then drew back a pace; but Little Volcano could see that he held himself in readiness for prompt action.

Long Tom was duly sworn, though he took the oath most ungraciously, declaring that he had no evidence to give.

"Your honor, I wish the witness to state the conversation that passed between him and a certain man, night before last, in the private room back of his gambling-room."

"Judge," angrily cried the gambler, "I will not submit to these insults—for such nonsense is nothing less. I repeat that I know nothing whatever of the matter in question, nor will I submit to be made a laughing-stock of by that—"

"I believe you are asking too much, prisoner," said the judge.

"Very well—I will call my other witness first, then. Only you will please hold that man ready to appear when wanted."

At a word from the judge, Long Tom reluctantly approached and took a seat beside him. Then Arkansaw Jack took the stand without waiting to be called. But before he did so, it was noticed that he spoke to two men, who quietly took up their positions behind the bench upon which the jury sat. And Gabriel, himself, placed a revolver upon the table before him. Expecting, they scarce knew what, the spectators drew nearer, with every sense upon the alert.

"Jedge," deliberately began the giant, "I've got a dirty story to tell, an' I ain't a-gwine to put no whitewash over it, nuther. They's bin a pesky heap o' shufflin' an' stockin' an' dealin' from the bottom in this little game, but the keards hain't all run out yit."

"The pris'ner yender sais as how two o' the

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ZIMRI COON ON THE TRAIL.

jury was bought up, an' I'm gwine to prove it. If you've any curiosity to know which ones they be—jest take a good look at 'em. You kin see it in thar faces; they'll look still greener afore I git through. I say this much jest to let 'em know that they's two good men close ahind 'em, who've got orders to plug 'em through ef they tries on any tricks. Now I'll talk business.

"The fust time I began to smell mischief, was night afore last. I was off duty, an' put in a part o' my time at Long Tom's shebang, a-buck-in' faro a little. The game soon busted up fer want o' players, most on 'em bein' out, as ye know, a'ter that old critter. As I started to go out, I hearn Long Tom say a few words as set me to thinkin'. The man he spoke to staid ahind, when I went outside. They shet the do', but I'm a tol'able tall infant, an' so, by stannin' on a rock, I peeked in over the do'-top. They two was jest goin' down sullar like, but I knowed it was the way Long Tom got into his private-room. That set me to thinkin' wuss'n ever, an' finally I cluded to do a little watchin' on my own a'count. I hung around ontel the feller came out. They didn't see me, 'twas so dark. The feller sais to Long Tom—I reckon he'd got purty full, from the way he talked—he said, sais he: 'You kin 'pend on us. Me an' my mate 'll stick like waz; ef it takes a month, we'll git a verdict. I'd hang my own pap fer hafe the money!' That gave me the scent, for I knowed the man as said it was on this jury, an' a'ter that I kep' the trail mighty cluss. It kem out that same night, or ruther mornin'. The varmint wasn't so drunk but he called out his mate to whar they thought nobody could hear to 'em. But I've played snake afore this on smarter Alecks then them, an' 'twasn't hard to shadow 'em. Then I hearn the hull story.

"Long Tom—easy, thar!" cried Arkansaw Jack, in a tone of thunder, rapidly covering the gambler with his revolver. "You jest set still—whooray fer the boss!" as Sheriff Hayes dextrously clasped a pair of handcuffs around the man's wrists. "Now I kin go on ag'in.

"Long Tom hed a big spite ag'in the pris'n'r yender, an' hed offered two thousan' dollars down if these two cusses would vote guilty, an' hold out ontel they brung the rest 'round to the same notion. Thar you hev it, short an' sweet. I've tuk my oath on it, an' it's true, every word." Then turning toward the jury, he laughed, scornfully.

Two men sat there alone, guilt written upon every feature. The foreman and his colleagues had drawn aside in angry disgust. A hiss of scorn arose from the spectators.

"Silence!" cried Judge Lynch, arising. "Mr. Gabriel, you will see that those two scoundrels are placed under strict guard—along with this fellow. They are a disgrace to humanity, and if I live, they shall receive their reward.

"Now, gentlemen of the jury, you have heard this case, on both sides. It remains for you to pronounce on the prisoner's innocence or guilt. Where the evidence conflicts, you are to take that which you believe to be true. But all this you know. I will briefly run over the points as I see them.

"One charge is that of murder. Two men have been killed, either maliciously or in self-defense. That they were dirty, no-count rascals, I freely admit, and in one sense their death is a benefit to all decent people. But that isn't the point. If this gold-placer belonged to them, then their death was murder; if not—if the prisoner owned the chart, you must bring him in innocent of that charge.

"The other charge—for that of robbery is included in the first count—is that of belonging to Joaquin's gang of cutthroats. I am free to admit that this point seems pretty much mixed. That he has been in Joaquin's camp, the prisoner admits; also that Joaquin has been of material service to him at least twice subsequently.

But his own story, if you can believe it, explains that pretty clearly. These are the points, then, for you to consider. And so, gentlemen, the case lies in your hands."

The foreman whispered for a few minutes with his fellows, then arose and stated that they wished to be where they could discuss the subject more freely. At a nod from the judge, Arkansaw Jack conducted them to the log cabin, then returned, after locking them in.

Hour after hour passed by, slowly enough, without any sign from the jury, but no one thought of leaving the spot. A fire was kindled as night fell. As the hours rolled on, betting on the verdict became more and more animated. Little Volcano listened to the loud voices with a peculiar thrill; it was a novel situation for one to be in.

A figure gradually drew nearer, until it stood beside the prisoner. A low, familiar hiss startled him—a voice whispered:

"Hold yourself ready for quick work—things is a-workin'!"

Luckily the darkness concealed his sudden start as he recognized the voice, but when he looked around, the figure had vanished.

At this moment came a startling sound—loud voices raising that cry so thrilling—so appalling in its nature:

"Fire! Fire!—the town is on fire!"

For the proper comprehension of the scenes to follow, a brief retrospective glance is necessary. The reader, then, will please glance back to the first day of the trial—to that portion of it where the "Grand River Waugh-hoss" received his well-merited reward for audacious perjury.

Until that moment Zimri Coon had never given a thought to escape, after seeing how closely they were guarded. To all outward appearances he was content that matters should take their course, satisfied that all would come out right in the end, that the innocent would not be called upon to suffer for the guilty. But the old digger was far from being as wholly at ease as he pretended. If there was one thing he dreaded more than death itself, it was "the law." This was partially owing to the teaching of his father, who had, if the truth would be told, more than once come under its clutches, and still later, when Zimri was young, he was taken in by a "land shark," receiving a bogus deed in return for his last dollar. Zimri settled down to hard work, built him a double log-house, put in a small crop, and was just on the point of starting off for a certain buxom young girl who had promised to share his fortunes at the proper time, when the actual owner of the land put in an appearance. Zimri did all he could, but the result can readily be imagined; he lost his little all. To cap the climax, his promised wife, when she learned the truth, gave him the cold shoulder. That settled Zimri. Cursing the law and all its instruments, he struck out into the trackless wilderness, soon turning up as a trapper in the employ of General Ashley, of St. Louis.

"The law kin make a white man outen a nigger, a Injun out of a 'John,' an' a angel 'th wings out o' a hundred-year-old Pi-ute squaw" he was wont to say. "I'd ruther rattle side holts with the divil hisself than to tetch its little finger 'th a forty-foot pole!"

Hence, though Zimri had a little more faith in lynch law, since it was generally administered by men of his own class, he gave himself over for lost when the trial fairly began, and he saw that perjury was in order. Then came the episode of Bill Blazes. He saw judge, jury and spectators all completely absorbed—for the time being utterly oblivious of everything else. He saw his chance, and eagerly pointed it out to Little Volcano. But the boy miner firmly refuse to make the attempt. Conscious of his own innocence, he could not believe that false evidence would convict him.

There was no time to lose. Already they could hear the loud yells of the tortured "waugh-hoss." A moment's delay might be fatal. Under any other circumstances Zimri Coon would have suffered death rather than desert his comrade, but—not law. He darted away with wonderful speed and noiselessness, heading for the hillside as the nearest point where he could gain cover. Yet, only for an accident, he might have been discovered.

Leaping over a low line of bushes, he stepped upon something round and yielding, falling flat to the ground, with a force that drove the breath out of his body for the moment. Before he could arise he heard the wild yell of surprise from below, and knew that his flight had been discovered. His first impulse was to take to his heels, but reason told him that such a course would be rank folly. There were too many horses and mules standing near, for that.

A long life of danger and self-dependence had quickened his wits, and an emergency rarely found him without a plan to meet it with. Just so now. His eyes fell upon the moss-covered, worm-eaten log over which he had stumbled. Between it and the bushes lay a little hollow, where some rocks had been removed for building purposes. Hastily crawling into this, he cautiously rolled the log over until it fairly covered him, yet being supported in such a way that he could change his position whenever it became irksome.

And there he lay during the hot search; more than once the miners passed close beside him, without the faintest suspicion that the log covered the object of their search, even if they noticed that it had been recently moved.

Those hours were the longest ones Zimri Coon ever passed, but he would have endured even more than that rather than to fall again into the clutches of the law. Though all sounds of pursuit soon died away, Zimri did not venture forth from his novel covert until long after the sun sunk to rest and night had settled over the earth. During this time his thoughts had been busy. On one point he was resolved. Little Volcano must be rescued, if it lay in mortal power to accomplish it. But how? Alone, unarmed, himself hunted by scores of men—the prospect was gloomy enough. Still, before the time came when he felt it safe to leave his covert, Zimri had fully decided upon his plans, and once in motion he lost no time in carrying them out to the best of his ability.

Rolling back the log, he cautiously stole down the hillside and entered the town. Though carefully avoiding the lighted spots—which were few, as nearly every able-bodied man was

still out in search of the fugitive, Zimri walked upright and with well-assumed carelessness. No one seeing him would have suspected the truth. Still he did not care to run any unnecessary risks, nor to lose any more time than he could help, and in a few minutes he paused beside a rude slab shanty, and gently tapped upon the door. There was no reply, and a chuckle of satisfaction broke from the old trapper's lips. He had counted upon the cabin being empty. He pulled a small strip of wood from between two slabs. A string lay coiled up behind it. Pulling this the door opened, and like one well acquainted with the interior, Zimri entered. A few moments' fumbling in the dark gave him what he wanted, and after carefully closing the door, leaving all as he had found it, he rapidly glided across the valley, soon leaving the town far behind him.

"Timber Dick 'll think the devil hes stole hi old weepins," chuckled Zimri, as he fumbled at the revolver now in his belt. "I'll make it a right with him ef this thing turns out—thunder! it must turn out right!"

Zimri knew that he was bound upon a mission of particular peril, and felt that he could not attempt it entirely unarmed. Reasoning that the end justified the means, he had entered Timber Dick's shanty and confiscated the revolver and ammunition belt which he knew always hung from a particular peg upon the wall. With this, both as a means of self-defense and an aid in procuring food, he felt capable of carrying out the bold plan he had formed while lying in his narrow prison upon the hillside. And that plan was to seek out Joaquin Murieta, to tell him in what peril Little Volcano was placed, mainly through him, and to claim his assistance in rescuing him.

Not one thought did Zimri give to the danger he himself would run in attempting to deliver this message, save as it would affect the prisoner. If some of the outlaws did not pick him off before he could gain speech with Joaquin, all might be well. Only—how was he to find Joaquin—where look for him? That was the rub. The outlaw was here to-day, there tomorrow. He thought little of traversing seventy-five and even a hundred miles betwixt sun and sun. Knowing all this Zimri set about his task with some hopes of success. He knew that the outlaw's wife had been badly injured; he knew, too, that Joaquin held her dear as the apple of his eye. The country was up in arms against him. Jack Hayes and Harry Love had both raised companies with the avowed purpose of hunting him down. He would be more than usually prudent on his wife's account. Knowing all this, Zimri Coon felt tolerably confident that the outlaw would be found, if at all, up amid the mountains of the north, and toward them he hastened now.

It is unnecessary to follow him step by step, to record all his disappointments, to tell how sick his heart grew as the days flew rapidly by, leaving him, seemingly, as far as ever from the object of his search. But he persevered, and his reward came at last.

He discovered the outlaws' retreat just at sunset in a little valley nestling between the mountains. He saw that regular guards were placed at every possible point where an approach could be made. Yet, when night came, Zimri started for the camp, resolved to do or die. That was a terrible two hours, and aged him more than as many years. Not that he feared death so much for himself, but he knew that the life of his friend hung in the balance as well. Yet he passed the outposts undiscovered, and fairly entered the camp. He saw Joaquin seated before a tent. He glided forward, and, before the outlaws divined the truth, he laid his only weapon at Murieta's feet and claimed his protection. Nor was his trust betrayed. The outlaw recognized him, and politely returned his pistol, bidding his men fall back.

Then Zimri told his story. He made Joaquin believe that Little Volcano owed his present danger alone to his acquaintance with him—which was nearly correct, as the reader is aware. The appeal was not in vain. Murderer though he was, with hand stained in the heart's blood of scores of victims, Joaquin Murieta was as true a friend as he was a terrible enemy.

Within the hour they were upon the road, leaving only three or four trusted men to care for the women. Joaquin did not spare horseflesh. There was great fear lest they should be too late, ride hard as they might, and Zimri urged them on, unreasonably angry that they should tire before himself, cursing the poor horses whenever they absolutely required a rest.

Yet, though his motives were good, perhaps it would have been better if he had failed in his task. Even if success should crown his efforts, such a rescue could only the more surely condemn Little Volcano.

The vicinity of Hard Luck was reached at last, and while the horsemen halted under cover, Zimri crept up the ridge and breathlessly peered down upon the busy scene. Thank God! he was not too late!

He could see the judge, the prisoner—but the jury was absent. That told him the state of affairs. He returned to the party, and first sending a man to take his place, he consulted with

Joaquin as to the best course of procedure. When he learned the probable number of spectators, all of whom would be fully armed, Joaquin drew aside and pondered long and deeply.

He knew it would be rank folly to attempt an open rescue, with his handful of men, scarcely half as many as the spectators. There must be a diversion—and to that point his strong mind was bent. Gradually his brow cleared, and he gave to Zimri the result of his cogitations.

"If they do not attempt to hang him before dark," he said, "I think we can manage it. If they do—then we will charge them and do what we can; at least I will not live to see my friend murdered. If they *do* delay until dark—listen. Six of my men will enter the town, ready for work. They will set fire to as many houses—the larger the better. In the confusion that follows we must do our work. If we could only warn him—"

"I'll do that," eagerly cried Zimri. "I kin creep in among 'em, like I did on your fellers. I'll see that the boy is ready for whatever may come."

And so it was decided; all depending upon whether the jury should give in a verdict before night came to cover the movements of the rescuers.

Bundles of grass and cloth were formed, mingled with dried twigs and sprinkled with gunpowder, over all of which were emptied every liquor-flask in the party. With these bundles the six chosen men were armed, as the night descended, and the moment of action drew near.

Zimri made a circuit and entered the town from the upper end, and managed to mingle with the crowd, escaping recognition by keeping some distance from the fire. He alone of all that party caught the first faint light of the kindling fires, and gliding forward he managed to gain a position immediately behind the prisoner. He uttered the old familiar signal, and saw that Little Volcano had not forgotten it. Then he uttered the warning already recorded, and, slipping aside, prepared for action. At every risk he must prevent any one seizing the prisoner until Joaquin should bring up the main body of his men.

Then the alarm broke forth—*fire! fire!*

CHAPTER XXIX.

JOAQUIN TO THE RESCUE.

THE alarm found Zimri Coon ready and impatient for work. He promptly took up the cry—yelling fire fit to split his throat, but at the same time pressing closer to the boy miner's side. Instantly all was confusion. The shouts still came from the town, where Joaquin's men were now performing the second act, straining their voices to increase the uproar and confusion. Added to this came the shrill screams of women—and over all the fast-increasing ruddy glare as the flames shot higher and higher.

There was a momentary pause, during which each man of the startled crowd gazed vacantly toward the direction whence the alarm proceeded—but only for a moment. One hoarse, peculiar roar of voices arose as, with one accord, the diggers sprung forward, forgetting all else save the fire beyond; and foremost among them were Jack Hayes and Arkansas Jack.

Old Zimri could not suppress a yell of exultation as he saw how perfectly his plans were being carried out. Then he was beside Little Volcano, crying, eagerly:

"Come, little 'un," as he shook the boy miner by the shoulder. "Puckachee's the word. The fuder we git from here afore daybreak the healthier I'll feel. Come—"

"Skip out, old man—don't let them find you here, or they'll say you had a finger in this dirty work. Go—before it's too late—I'm going to stay and see the thing out."

"You can't mean it, lad—they'll hang ye, shore as cats ain't dogs! Come, quick! They's true fri'nds cluss to han' only waitin' fer you. Wake up an' make haste—"

"No—I never ran away from an enemy yet—"

These words passed in breaths quick almost as thought itself. The crowd had barely passed them by, rushing in hot haste toward the fires. All had joined in the stampede save two men besides Zimri Coon. One was the boy miner; the other sat beside the green baize-covered table, near the chair vacated by Judge Lynch. Upon his shapely wrists were handcuffs, as revealed by the glowing embers before him.

Long Tom, bitterly feeling the degradation of his position, had heard the wild alarm with a sullen indifference, even as he would had he known that his own building was among those being consumed. Sullenly he kept his seat, now and then casting an evil glance over to where the prisoner had been placed. He saw that one dark figure remained beside Little Volcano, as though guarding against his escape. But then—broken words came to his ears as Zimri Coon grew more earnest in his pleading against the boy miner's firmly-taken resolution. Long Tom understood it all now—the whole daring ruse was clear to him, and for one moment his fierce, lawless nature fairly thrilled with admiration for the man who could—as he then believed—conceive

such a bold plan and successfully carry it out. But then, all his hatred and fear returned with redoubled force, and he resolved to prevent the boy miner's escape, even though it cost him his own life. The thought was enough. Springing to his feet, he yelled at the top of his voice:

"Rescue—rescue! The prisoner is escaping!"

With a bitter curse, Zimri raised his arm and fired at the figure. With one last cry, Long Tom sunk to the earth. But his work was done. The shrill cry reached the ears of Sheriff Hayes, and in an instant he turned around, calling upon Jack Gabriel and his other friends to follow him. For a time in vain. With the fire in their faces, the crackling, devouring flames flashing full in their eyes, it was no easy task to check their impetuous rush, and Jack Hayes was nearly thrown down ere his furious curses and yells, added to rapid blows, made any impression upon those immediately around him.

Zimri Coon saw that the alarm was given, and knowing there was no time to lose, he uttered the signal to Joaquin to charge, at the same time seizing Little Volcano and flinging him across his shoulders like a sack of meal he ran toward the point of the hill around which the outlaws were just charging.

"Here's the lad—kickin' wuss'n a rantankerous he jackass!" panted Zimri, as he hailed Joaquin and checked the progress of the outlaws. "Whar's my hoss, some one? We must scratch gravel mighty lively, ur we'll ketch more gruel'n we kin swaller. Ouch! dog-gone it, boy, don't kick sol my ribs hain't made o' cast-iron!"

"Let me down, you old fool—let me loose or I'll be the death o' ye!" snarled the boy miner, plunging and kicking like one possessed. "I tell you I'll not run away—"

"Take it easy, lad, an' I'll run away fer ye," spluttered Zimri, as he dextrously tossed the captive across his horse's withers and then scrambled into the saddle. "You're pizen mad now, but you'll soon git over that, an' I reckon I kin stan' a little cussin', when I know I'm doin' right."

"Let me down!" cried Little Volcano; but his words were almost drowned by the fierce, prolonged yell of angry vengeance that rose upon the night-air.

"You hear that? They'd be nice hands to drap into, wouldn't they?" half-laughed Zimri Coon. "You'd be chewed into paper-rags afore you'd time to—"

The yell of baffled vengeance changed into a roar of discovery, and a dozen bright spouts of flame sent as many revolver-bullets toward the shadowy, indistinct mass, and as one man the crowd of diggers leaped forward.

Sharp and clear the voice of Joaquin Murieta rung forth, and as promptly was the volley returned. Though no death-yell followed—save one or two trifling scratches, the brief encounter was bloodless; though no death followed either volley, the bright flashes of powder had revealed the figures of enough horsemen to make the diggers more cautious than usual, and when Joaquin wheeled his horse and ordered a retreat, only a few hastily-dispatched bullets followed them then. The very deliberation with which the rescuers retreated, proved their best safeguard. An ambushade was what the miners suspected. And then—the fire!

The outlaws under Joaquin rode away from Hard Luck at a moderate trot, their chief bringing up the rear, and occasionally halting to listen for any sounds of pursuit. The gloom concealed a grim smile as nothing of this sort met his ear, and then he gave the word for more rapid riding, eager to reach his mountain retreat—and Clarina—once more, knowing right well that his trail would be taken up with the first gleam of day, if not before.

Little Volcano was now riding upright in the saddle, with Zimri seated behind him guiding the doubly-laden horse. Though he had ceased his struggles, finding them in vain while his hands were still confined, he did not spare his tongue.

"This night's work divides us forever, old man," he said, his voice trembling with anger. "The worst was over. I had stood my trial, and on the evidence no man could have brought me in guilty. Now—what can they think? Ten thousand witnesses could not convince them of my innocence. Who will believe that Joaquin took all this trouble to aid one not belonging to his band? From this night on I am a marked man, to be run down and shot or hung like a dog! And I owe it all to *you*—the man I called my friend!"

"A fri'nd I've bin an' a fri'nd I'll be, long as life an' breath lasts, little 'un," quietly replied Zimri Coon. "You can't rub that out with hot words. I did what I thought was fer the best; ef I made a mistake 'twas through love o' you, lad. Maybe I be a old fool, as you say; most like I be. Mebbe I orter to lay low an' let them devils—fer devils they is when onet they git thar mad up—hang you fer what you never did. But that ain't my idee o' what a fri'nd should be. I did the best I could."

"And that best was the worst you could have done," muttered Little Volcano, gloomily.

Through the rest of that night Joaquin led his men on through the hills, never once pausing until the sun arose. Then, beside a mountain spring they turned their animals loose to feed at will.

Little Volcano had been thinking, during that ride, and as he cooled down, he realized the injustice of which he had been guilty. Now, as he sat beside Zimri, withdrawn a little from the body of the outlaws, he brought himself to confess as much. The eager light which filled the old man's eyes, the nervous quiver with which his fingers clasped the boy miner's hand, was eloquence beyond words.

"Them words is wuth more to me, lad, then ef they was solid dimints—Lord love ye, honey! I tried to make out I-didn't keer much, but ef it 'd bin daylight, little 'un, dog my sister's cats up a tree! ef you wouldn't have see'd salt water runnin' like a pump! I am a old fool, jest as you said—the idee!"

"You drop that, old man," muttered Little Volcano, not without some emotion, as he wrung Zimri's hand. "I was well-nigh crazy, then, and I said more than I meant. You did only what you thought was right. You couldn't have even guessed the turn matters had taken after you left. After all, there are other countries than California."

"Wherever you go, thar I'll go, either as your pardner, or a-follerin' you—that's flat. An' some day or other I'll nake up fer this mistake—I will, if I live."

"If you don't drop it, as I said, blest if I don't crawl up your back and chew your ear—and that's flat!"

"You cain't, with them bracelets on," grinned Zimri, entering into the spirit of the boy miner. "Well, they's one comfort. Joaquin says he's got a feller in camp as kin pick any lock ever was 'vented."

"I only wish we could get rid of them by any other means," muttered Little Volcano. "The good will of such men is little better than their hatred. Since I first met him, I've had nothing but bad luck. I've a good mind to give him the slip now, and run the risk of getting them off."

"There is no need of that, sener," quietly said the outlaw, turning toward them with a faint smile. "You are your own master. Whenever you feel like leaving us, I will bid you God speed. When Joaquin makes a friend, it is for life. Whatever is mine, is yours."

Little Volcano made no reply, but none the less did he feel that he was and had been ungrateful, after what the outlaw had ventured in his cause.

Shortly afterward the horses were caught and the ride was resumed, nor did they halt again until the little valley was reached, and the outlaws were warmly greeted by their women.

Joaquin looked at Little Volcano a little doubtfully, but then called one of his men, who quickly removed the handcuffs. At a motion, the boy miner followed Joaquin into one of the tents.

The outlaw's wife was reclining upon a pallet of furs, but half-arose, an eager light in her eyes as they entered. With a strange bashfulness, Little Volcano approached and received the warm thanks, almost caresses of Clarina, as the preserver of her life. He could only stammer a few words of acknowledgement, and retreated as quickly as possible. Joaquin followed him, carrying a brace of revolvers, with an ammunition-belt, which he pressed upon the boy miner.

"You *must* take them," persisted the outlaw. "There is no blood upon them, and if you persist in leaving us, they will not come amiss. I would offer you horses, but—they might get you into trouble, as we do not have any papers to prove our ownership. Now, my friend—though I wish you would cast your lot with us—you are free as air. Only—remember, sometimes, that Joaquin Murieta is not *all* devil!"

CHAPTER XXX.

SLEEPY GEORGE AT WORK.

"I *did* the best I knowed how—swore jest what you told me to do, 'nd I don't see what you're crawlin' up my back fer—how could I help it?" snarled Sleepy George, looking sideways at his master, much like a cur that longs to bite, but dreads the consequences.

"You made an infernal botch of it from first to last, and proved yourself a bigger fool than even I thought you—more than that couldn't be said," coolly retorted Long Tom, knocking the ashes from his cigar.

The past night had wrought some startling changes in the town of Hard Luck and more than one of its inhabitants.

Joaquin had been suffered to retreat, taking with him the late prisoner, unmolested after the first volley. Then every energy was directed toward the fires. Though there was comparatively no wind, the flames spread rapidly, leaping from shanty to cabin, from tents to the roofs of dug-outs, as though bent upon entirely destroying the town. Owing to the scarcity of water, or rather means to handle it, there was only one way to fight the fire, and that method was promptly adopted. A score or more buildings were torn down—an easy task with such flimsy structures. This was suf-

ficient. The conflagration was checked, and before long died entirely out. Few of the more prominent buildings had suffered. For obvious reasons Joaquin's men had avoided the more frequented quarters, or houses where lights denoted occupants. By this chance both Long Tom's gambling-house and the "Miner's Rest" escaped.

The moment all danger was over, Sheriff Hayes demanded and received the attention of the begrimed miners. His speech was short but pointed. Joaquin had given them the dare, once again; and it should be the last. He did not call for volunteers; he simply bade every man be ready to take the trail with the first gleam of day.

Meantime, Sleepy George had strolled idly toward the spot where Long Tom lay—not, however, to weep over the corpse of his late master. Satisfied that no one was watching him, the bummers' hand stole swiftly into Long Tom's pocket—then a sharp yell of terror broke from his lips. A cold hand grasped his arm—there was a metallic click—and a low voice hissed in his ear:

"They heard your cry and are coming here; promise to do what I wish of you, or I'll tell them you were trying to rob me—quick! promise, or—"

"I'll do it—I'll do it," gasped Sleepy George, who knew from experience how little it required to set such a mob on fire; still less, after what had already transpired.

The hasty shot fired by Zimri Coon had failed to work his will. Unless making close allowance, one is certain to overshoot, in the nighttime. This was the case now, and Long Tom, though stunned, received nothing more than a scalp-wound. The actions of Sleepy George aroused him completely.

The rescue of Little Volcano by Joaquin had changed many things. Whatever verdict the jury might have brought in, had matters been allowed to take their usual course, can only be surmised; but had they been called upon for one now, there would have needed no deliberation. With this, came a change toward Long Tom, who had, at the risk of his life, exposed the outlaw's plot. He was set free, and even honored by some because he had labored hard for the conviction of the prisoner.

With the day-dawn, Sheriff Hayes, with Arkansas Jack as his "right bower," rode out of Hard Luck at the head of forty men, meaning to bring in Joaquin's scalp or lose his own. Neither Long Tom nor Sleepy George offered their services; both wounded, they had a good excuse for not serving.

"It doesn't much matter, though, as things have turned out," resumed Long Tom. "That young devil is as good as dead. Jack Hayes will hunt him down like a wolf, so we can count him out of the game. But there's that other—Crazy Billy. Twice you made a wretched botch there—of a job a child could do! You are growing worse than useless, old man. Unless there are changes for the better, and that soon, you'll have to be looking out for some other location. I want men around me."

"You want me to try ag'in—is that what you meant, out yonder?" muttered Sleepy George, but with an air of evident relief.

"Yes; and the sooner you do it the better will your pay be."

"I won't try it on alone; you must let in my two mates, anyhow. They's no tellin' who a body may run against up in the hills. Let them in and I'll do it inside o' two days."

"Take as many as you please; the pay will be the same, though. And if you let in any new hands, keep a close tongue; I have dealings only with you—you will pay them their share; remember that."

"Hamfat and Cockeye is all I ax, boss, an' I don't reckon you need hev any fear o' them," grinned the bummer.

Glad to escape so easily, Sleepy George lost no time in seeking out his comrades in crime, whom he found playing draw poker for drinks, in their shanty, with a jug between them, from which the winner of each game took a horn. But on his entrance the pasteboards were cast aside, and they listened to the bummer's story with no little interest. The reward offered was ample, yet the worthy pair seemed to be somewhat crossed by recent events.

"They's money in it, es you say," said Cock-eyed Waddel. "But 'tain't wuth the risk. They's a heap better lay-out waitin' on us, ef we bin only strike it. You know we own that placer; what's to hinder us from turnin' honest diggers, an' makin' our 'pendent fortune—"

"Jack Hayes," dryly interrupted Sleepy George. "I don't reckon 'twould be healthy fer the feller as jumps that claim ontel he gits his permission; anyhow, I don't keer much about tryin' it on. But they's another lay—thar's the gold them fellers stole from us—"

"Whar?" was the eager, simultaneous inquiry.

"It goes with this job," grinned the bummer. "Share an' share alike, ef you go in with me. What's the word?"

There was little need of his asking this question; there could be but one answer. And then Sleepy George grew more circumstantial.

The gold which had been given into charge of Jack Hayes, still lay within the log "jug," covered over with a pile of old sacks. It had been utterly forgotten in the confusion and excitement following the rescue.

"We'll rig up as if fer a long trip—if anybody axes us we'll tell 'em we're gwine to look fer the varmints as robbed us of our honest secret. We'll leave this some time afore night. We'll strike into the hills an' lay low fer darkness. Then we'll mosey back yere, watch our chance, slip in the jug, pocket the slum an' when they find out it's gone, they can't none on 'em pick onto us takin' it," and Sleepy George fairly chuckled over his brilliant plan.

"It's even shares, 'member," put in Hamfat Zack.

"Honest Injun!" and so the matter was settled.

The trio quickly perfected their arrangements, even inviting notice. Pet Pete gave them a friendly warning; he didn't think it would be healthy working on that placer until Sheriff Hayes had settled the question of ownership.

"We don't 'tend to strike a lick thar," candidly replied the bummer. "Nur we don't mean to let anybody else do it, nuther. The chances is them two cusses 'll try to play bugs onto us, by slippin' in thar while they're bein' looked fer in some other place. Ef they do—we'll fetch 'em in camp, dead or alive, you bet!"

Pet Pete laughed shortly. Though he said nothing, he did not believe that trio would care much about meeting Little Volcano and old Zimri, after what had passed.

As already arranged, the three men took to the hills and patiently bided their time. The night fell, dark and threatening a storm. Everything seemed favoring them. By ten o'clock they had returned and entered the town, stealing along unseen, reaching the log cabin and crouching down close to its walls until the moment for action had come. The delay was not long. The streets of Hard Luck seemed completely deserted, particularly as the rain began to fall in blinding torrents. Satisfied that there was no danger of discovery, the three men glided around the building and opening the door, entered. A low growl of delight broke from Sleepy George's lips as he felt the bag containing the gold. He would have carried it out himself, but that did not suit his comrades. As nearly as possible, in the dark, they divided the gold, then they stole away through the darkness and storm, eager to reach some place where it would be safe for them to halt and examine the prize. This spot was soon after reached; deep down in a ravine, where a projecting ledge made an admirable "lean-to" camp. Here a fire was kindled, with some difficulty, and by its rays the gold was examined. A division was attempted, but that was soon found to be impossible. They had no leader. Neither was willing to take the chances of "guessing." Finally it was resolved to cache the treasure, where it should remain until they had performed Long Tom's work. Then they could choose their time, and seek more congenial quarters, to begin a new life, with their gold.

The storm cleared off sometime before day, and the worthy trio picked their way through the hills toward the cave inhabited by their intended victim. It was truly wonderful what a strong affection had sprung up between them in that one night! If either chanced to fall behind for a moment, two pairs of eyes were instantly searching for him. Never were three men who stuck together more closely than these!

"We're most thar," cautiously muttered Sleepy George. "Keep your eyes skinned. The cuss may be out som'ers. Ef he sets eyes on us, the jig's up fer keeps. He ain't hafe the fool he 'pears to be."

Cautiously, stealthily as red-skins upon the war-path, the assassins stole forward, nearing the hermit's cave by degrees, their eyes roving over every rock and point of the hillside, but nothing was seen of their game. Not a sound came from the cave.

"Pick your ground, fellers," muttered Sleepy George. "Take kiver whar you kin hide your starns as well as figger-heads. They's no tellin' which way the varmint may come, ef he's out. Keep your shooters ready fer work, but don't use 'em ontel you hear me shoot. Then, if I don't down him, open on him, hot and heavy. Understand!"

They did understand, and said as much. They sought cover, each in a clump of bushes, within easy range of the cave, and composed themselves to wait as patiently as possible.

Hour after hour passed without interruption, and they began to fear that their game had taken to flight, when suddenly a curious sound startled them. Faint and indistinct, wailing, yet ironical, for a time the assassins were at a loss to understand its purport. But then it grew louder and clearer, until they knew that some being was singing, within the hermit's cave. They cocked their weapons, and eagerly peered out at the vine-masked entrance.

The singing died away, and for a moment all was still. Then the ambushed men's eyes glowed as they saw the vines vibrate, then slowly move aside. Crazy Billy stepped forth; and

stood like a statue of stone, gazing fixedly down the valley.

Sleepy George leveled his rifle, and took a long and deliberate aim. Then his finger touched the trigger. A sharp report—a puff of smoke; then he peered breathlessly through the bushes. He saw Crazy Billy reel back, then fall heavily forward.

With a wild cry of triumph, he sprung from his ambush.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TO THE DEATH!

ANY person in the slightest degree acquainted with Sheriff Hayes would have seen that he meant business, when he took up Joaquin's trail. There was a cool deliberation in every movement, yet nothing cut to waste. He saw that his followers were well mounted, thoroughly armed, with plenty of ammunition, food, water and liquor. He waited until daylight, then placed two Indians—friendly Utes—upon the trail, promising them a barrel of whisky in case they ran the game to earth. The scouts lifted the trail rapidly, though at times the ground was hard and rocky, and they had to proceed more slowly. Still, fast or slow, Hayes would not allow a man to pass his trackers.

"I know we'll find them, this way, even if it takes a year, while, by overrunning the trail, we may get fooled, just as we have twice before."

A few of the more impatient grumbled, but it was done beneath their breath. They could see that Jack Hayes was "rattled;" to most men that knowledge was enough.

As Hays often declared, afterward, his ill-fortune all came to him in a lump. Steadily fixed as was his resolve never to leave that trail while Joaquin lived, it was fated to be broken. The trail, at one point, wound around the side of a precipitous hill, along a narrow, uneven ledge. At a certain point, near midway, the horse bestrode by Hayes made a misstep, stumbled, and though desperately striving to recover itself, plunged over the precipice with an almost human shriek of terror. An unusually skillful rider, Jack Hayes did not lose his presence of mind. Realizing the peril, he freed his feet from the stirrups and made a leap toward the wall, but one of his spurs caught in the thick mane of his mustang. The hairs broke loose, but not until the sheriff lay upon the very verge of the abyss. Jack Gabriel sprung over his animal's head to lend his assistance, but he was too late. Without a sound, though he must have felt that death was at his feet, Hayes slipped over the edge, and fell down—like a shot.

His followers could distinctly hear the double thud as horse and man struck upon the rocks, far below. Horrified, they peered over the escarpment. Over a hundred feet below lay the two bodies, both close together, apparently dead. One breathless moment, then the entire party hastened ahead or turned back, to reach the body of their leader. Imagine their joyful surprise, on reaching the bottom: Jack Hayes greeted them with a laugh—faint, to be sure, but far from what a dead man might be supposed to utter. His escape had been little short of miraculous. The brief struggle upon the ledge, before falling, was what had saved him. Shooting down, feet foremost, he struck fairly upon the animal's carcass. Yet the accident was enough to decide his share in the coming fight. Though no bones were broken, his limbs and muscles were so severely strained that every motion was agony. He did insist upon being aided into the saddle, but ten minutes' work conquered even his iron will.

"That settles it, boys!" he muttered, with a groan, more of intense disappointment than of pain. "It's good-by Joaquin, for me! I'm clean knocked up. It needn't matter much, though, for the rest of you. You know what we started for. There's Jack Gabriel—he can lead you just as well as I could—you can't elect a better captain. Only remember; there must be only one leader, whoever you choose. What he says must be law. Wherever he goes, you must follow. Promise me this; then the sooner you light out, the better I'll feel."

This proposal was greeted with cheers. Next to Hayes, Arkansas Jack was the most popular leader that could have been found in those parts.

"Ef we do run the devils down," said Jack from Arkansas, earnestly. "Ef we do run 'em down, boss, they'll each one of us fellers put in a lick fer you."

Hayes did not reply, but impatiently motioned them on after the trackers, who had not even paused when the sheriff went over the cliff's side. He was left with plenty of food, water and everything he could possibly require. He listened intently until the hoof-strokes died away, then coolly commenced to bathe his bruises with whisky.

Steadily the Man-hunters pressed on, nor did they make a regular halt until the darkness of night made further trailing impossible. At times through the day, when the trackers were picking out the trail in an unusually rocky or barren spot, the men would dismount and allow their animals to pick a mouthful of grass.

By this means, though rarely proceeding faster than a moderate trot, a considerable distance was covered in the day, and when they went into camp that night, they were not ten miles from the valley in which the outlaws had sought refuge, though they, of course, were ignorant of the fact.

With the first gleam of day—a day that stands prominent in the blood-stained annals of the Golden State—the Man-hunters took the trail again. The events which are to be recorded are matters of history. Though the details may not be pleasant, they are given a place here because from that day began *Joaquin Murieta's last ride*.

The sun was an hour high when the keen eyes of Arkansaw Jack caught sight of a small party of horsemen, some distance ahead of them. Their trappings were plainly those of Mexicans or native Californians. This, added to their precipitate flight, convinced the Man-hunters that a portion of their game at least was afoot.

All thoughts of tracking was now at an end. With wild yells of triumph, the men, led by Gabriel, spurred forward in hot pursuit. The chase was a thrilling one, over rocks and crevices, along abysses, now crossing deep chasms in breakneck leaps—in two instances fatal ones. One outlaw and one maner found a grave hundreds of feet down below; but the chase swept on without a pause or thought of the dead.

Under any other circumstances, Arkansaw Jack would scarcely have run into the trap he did, but with the fugitives little more than a rifle-shot ahead, their animals losing ground inch by inch, not one among the pursuers suspected the truth—that they were being decoyed into a cunningly-contrived ambush; yet such was the case.

Knowing that he would assuredly be pursued, Joaquin determined to strike a blow that would not soon be forgotten. He placed look-outs upon the surrounding peaks; he sent out small parties of scouts, with instructions to lure the enemy into the trap, at all risks. His orders were obeyed. His sentinels saw the chase, and, only waiting to make sure that it was leading in the right direction, hastened down to take their share of the fight.

From that direction the valley (called Arroyo Centura) could be entered only by one trail. A narrow defile led through the high, precipitous hills. Twenty feet above the level began a series of ledges, thick strewn with bowlders and irregular fragments of rocks, affording the best of cover for an army, if needed. Here had Joaquin placed his men, in four bodies—two for each hill—some fifty yards apart.

Through this defile spurred the decoy, not one hundred yards ahead of the Man-hunters. On—on, until fairly within the jaws of death. Then Arkansaw Jack, who led, caught scent of a few tents in the valley beyond, and, divining the truth, as by instinct, abruptly halted. But his warning cry was blundered with the trumpet-like voice of Murieta, as he arose from his covert and fired the first shot in that horrible massacre.

What followed can scarcely be described. The walls seemed to vomit forth death to hapless horse and rider alike. One terrible storm of bullets—then came a perfect avalanche of stones and bowlders, crushing and maiming man and beast as they thundered down the narrow pass. The screams and groans of agony—oh! they were heartrending! Yet—high above all rose the shrill laugh of the outlaw chief; and then his words:

"Remember my wife—remember my brother!"

Five brief minutes were enough. So complete was the surprise, so deadly the attack, that not a dozen shots were fired by the Man-hunters—and those at random.

Then the smoke arose, the dust settled, and the scene was revealed in all its horror. Words are powerless to limn that picture. Enough that over two score men and horses lay in one mangled heap, dead!*

Three-Fingered Jack was among the first to scramble down the rocks. With a snarl of wolfish delight he flung himself upon the horrible heap, cutting and slashing with his knife at dead and dying alike. A devil in human shape, he fairly revelled in blood.

Joaquin saw one of the figures move, and bent over it. He saw that it was none other than Jack Gabriel, who had twice before tried to kill or capture him, and a bitter smile curled his thin lip. The wounded man's eyes opened, and as he recognized the face bending over him, he tried to draw a weapon. Joaquin dextrously kicked the pistol out of his hand, and calling two of his men, he bade them carry the man into camp. He followed them, leaving his men to plunder their victims at will.

He himself examined Jack's wounds, and then sent for an old woman, who grumblingly dressed them under his own eye. During all this,

Gabriel was cursing the outlaws and almost weeping over the sad fate of his comrades in the same breath.

"You are hard on us, soner," quietly said the outlaw. "What could we do? You came to kill us, and would have done so, had we not killed you. Be thankful that *you* are alive."

"I'd rather die than to owe my life to such as you," growled the wounded maner. "Kill me an' hev done with it. For, by the eternal! I'll kill you if ever I get a chance!"

At this moment Three-Fingered Jack came up, and as he heard these words, he leaped toward the prostrate figure, his blood-dripping knife ready for work. But Joaquin interfered, sternly ordering the assassin back.

"Let me kill him!" muttered the brute, licking his thick lips, the devil in his eyes. "Heir how he insults you, captain!—do let me touch him up with my knife! He's the one who slashed open my face—it burns like fire—only his heart's blood can cool it now!"

As though unable to control his insane rage, he sprang forward and buried his knife to the very hilt in the prisoner's heart, before a finger could be raised to prevent him.

"There—I swore I would—I've rubbed him out!" cried Manuel Garcia, facing Joaquin boldly.

"And by the eternal! I'll kill *you* for it!" grated Joaquin, cocking his revolver, and covering the murderer.

"Shoot!" boldly cried the assassin, tearing open his shirt. "Shoot! if you have so many friends you can spare me!"

For an instant Joaquin hesitated, his finger upon the trigger. Then the weapon was slowly lowered, without being discharged.

"For this once, then, I spare your life. But look out for the next," he said, coldly, as he turned away from the spot.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ZIMRI COUNTS A "COUP."

NEITHER Little Volcano nor Zimri Coon were concerned in the massacre. Though they had kept with Joaquin until the Arroyo Centura was reached, it was only that the boy maner might be rid of his handkerchiefs. While following the outlaw, they had decided to leave him at the earliest possible moment, though what course they would then pursue was still doubtful.

Little Volcano accepted the weapons as frankly as they were offered, pressing the outlaw's hand warmly. Zimri Coon was even less scrupulous, and when Joaquin made his remark about the horses, the old maner blantly replied:

"We're willin' to run the risks of *you* be, boss. They ain't no need tellin' you a how we don't hanker overly much after fallin' into the grips o' Jack Hayes an' his outfit. 'twouldn't be healthy. No more need I tell ye that the boys won't lose much time in takin' up your trail, for I reckon you know them jest as well as I do. 'Tain't this, then, if 'pears to me the funder we git away from this yere, the better we'll feel, sence, even if we did stay long o' you, we couldn't fight a'inst them."

"I could wish you would stay—not only for the time being, but forever," earnestly replied Murieta. "I know—you would say that this is impossible. Very well; let it drop, then. Only, remember—if ever you feel in need of a stout arm and a true heart, Joaquin Murieta will be only too glad to answer."

"You've done more now than I can ever hope to repay," warmly cried the boy maner.

"That's true enough—durned if 'tain't! But you was talkin' 'bout losses. 'Pears like you've got plenty—more'n you'll ever need; I reckon we'll horry the loan of a couple—"

The outlaw chief bade them take their choice from the rude corral, and when this was done, he had them fitted with bridles, saddles and all accouterments, ready for the road. After this the leave-taking was brief. Both parties were anxious to be left to their own devices, and mounting, the two miners rode out of the valley, only breathing freely when a mile was put between them and the Arroyo Centura.

"I reckon we're the only two honest men as ever'll be able to say that!" exclaimed Zimri, emphatically.

"And I hope we have seen the last of them," gloomily rejoined Little Volcano. "Since that day when I first met him, everything has gone wrong with me. Only for him I would not now be a fugitive—an outlaw, thief, assassin, as men will call me! Ah, old man, if you had not been such a faithful friend—if you had thought of yourself, not of me—'twould all be over now. Either I would stand cleared in the sight of men, or all would be forgotten in my grave."

Zimri made no reply, but rode on in silence. He knew that the surest way would be to let his comrade have his thinking spell out once for all, and trust in time for banishing the gloomy visions.

They rode on as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, and put a good ten miles between them and the outlaws' retreat ere the waning light warned them to seek a camping place. Their preparations were simple enough.

Joaquin had provided them plentifully with clothing and bread; the weather was warm enough to render them comfortable without the aid of a fire, whose light might attract unfriendly eyes. So, lighting their pipes, they lay upon the ground beside the springs.

Little Volcano was the first to break the silence.

"Old man," he said, quietly, but firmly, "I've been thinkin' it all over, and I've made up my mind to go and give myself up—"

"Not to them fellows!" spluttered Zimri amazed.

"Yes, I'd rather let 'em hang at once than to have to sneak and dodge from hole to hole, seein' an enemy in every man. I haven't done anythin' to be ashamed of. I'll not let them call me a coward, as well as the rest."

"It'd be clean suicide—you wouldn't stan' the ghost of a chance! No, lad; you must thank I t'ers of it. You've got more enemies than you think. They're bound to hunt you down, or you give 'em the first chance. Jest lay low for a while, an' it'll all blow over."

"To turn up again wherever I may go. No, Zimri; you mean well enough, but you don't know me, yet. I couldn't live such a life. I know that people suspected me of such foul crimes—it would be a living death! No—I will have it settled, one way or another. If the worst comes—well, it won't matter much. They will say it runs in the Fletcher blood. But there's one thing I'd like cleared up, first. You remember what I told you, that night, about my brother?"

"An' them pictures—yes," granted Zimri then, with sudden excitement, he added: "Why you don't think he—Crazy Billy—you don't think *he's* your brother?"

"No—that is impossible. As I told you, I was hung—and buried; I saw them put him into his grave. And yet—those pictures! they are scenes from that—those black days. One face is that of my brother—the other that of Long Tom. Who could have drawn them? Not Long Tom, surely. But there was another man—there were *two* who swore away his life. For God! I believe Long Tom and this Crazy Billy are those two men—the ones I have sworn to hunt down and kill, by my murdered brother's blood!"

For some time there was silence. Old Zimri was thinking over this strange story—yet he could not see through the matter. There was something lacking.

Presently Little Volcano again spoke.

"This is what has been troublein' me, for a long, old man. I was only a little boy when this happened, and for years I was kept in ignorance of the truth. I knew that my brother had died—that was all. I was kept at school, an' rarely came home. Even then my mother would scarcely allow me out of her sight, and no one dared to speak openly to me before her. But then she died. On her death-bed she told me everything. She had never believed that her favorite, Charley, *could* be guilty. She told me, too, that the two men by whose evidence he was convicted had fled from justice, only a few months before, having robbed the bank in which they and Charley were employed. She had searched them out, to never leave the trail until they had found out their guilt or innocence. If they had murdered Charley, to search them out, must avenge him—that was her last legacy, promised—and she died."

"Then you mean to tackle Crazy Billy first?"

"Yes. I mean to go there to-morrow. I believe I can drag the truth from him, then I don't know exactly how, now. After that, well, when the time comes, 'twall arrange itself."

The conversation lapsed from this point, no soon afterward they lay down and slept soundly until day dived red. There seemed nothing to hurry them, particularly, and they ate the simple meal dexterately, but apparently thinking deeply. Zimri Coon it was who first spoke.

"I've been thinking over what you said, last night. I can't make it seem right ter ye to run your head into that hornet's nest, now. You ain't doin' nothin' wrong; then why shud you ax them fellows to wipe you out? For the jest what the hull thing amounts to. They string up a angel, jest now, a'ter what's happened."

"We've said enough on this point, pard," was the quiet reply. "I'd rather you would do it, now. We'll never agree, and so where's use in wasting breath? I'm going to give myself up, and stand the chances."

"You al'ays was obstinate 'n a double a twisted mule, anyhow!" grumbled Zimri, contentedly. "I s'pose you'll be wantin' me to coax 'em to lift *my* skull—"

"No—I speak only for myself."

"I'm glad o' that, fer I wouldn't do it, anyhow," grinned Zimri. "I'm a old, worn cuss, but I val'e my life at a bigger figger than that. But see here. They's one thing I *am* sure. You think this Long Tom is one o' them fellows. Ef you kin git any kind o' proof 'n a be of Crazy Billy, ef what you consait is so—take *him* off your hands, anyhow."

"Not while I live—mind that, pard. *My* game, remember. Still, if the worst comes, and they *do* put me out of the way before I do

* A historical fact. Only two men, of all that company, escaped with life; John Lynch and James Daly. From the latter, who is still living, I received this and other facts regarding Joaquin. B.

do my work, then it would comfort me to know that he did not entirely escape."

"That settles it, then!" coolly added Zimri. "If you goes under, I'll settle him—an' thar's my hand on it!"

The horses were caught up and saddled, and after a scramble up a high rock point, Zimri settled their course and they rode away in the direction of the hermit's cave. The distance was considerable, the trail rough and at times impassable, necessitating tedious circuits, so that it was late in the day when the travelers found themselves in the vicinity of the cave.

Suddenly Zimri drew rein, and, shading his eyes, peered steadily from beneath his broad palm.

"They's somethin' stirrin' over yender," he said, slowly. "I see'd somebody or somethin' slip into them bushes. It might be Crazy Billy, or it might be somebody we'd rather not meet jest now. Back out, lad; I reckon we'd better cache our critters ontel we make out the signs."

Little Volcano made no opposition, and retreating until they were hidden from view of the hillside, they dismounted and tethered their horses. Then, looking to his weapons, Zimri cautiously advanced, the boy miner keeping close to his heels.

The old hunter displayed no less caution than skill, pausing for moments behind each rock or bush from which he could peer out upon the ambush. Little Volcano exhibited some impatience, believing that Zimri's eyes had deceived him, or else that the object seen was some prowling animal. Still he did not refuse to imitate the old hunter.

"Thar!" at length muttered Zimri. "Look quick! cain't you see the starn eend o' some human critter a-pokin' itself outen that bush—the one growin' atween that black rock an' the broken-top cedar?"

"Yes—I see! There's mischief going on there, old man, and we must stop it! Crazy Billy is my game!"

"It does look like they was layin' fer somebody—but I reckon we'll take a hand in, es you say. But soft an' easy does it, lad. They may be a dozen varmints thar. You foller me; do jest as I do."

He sunk down on the ground and glided noiselessly along toward the ambush. He meant to reach a little pile of rocks some three score yards from the bushes where the man had expected himself, then challenge him, and trust to luck for the rest. But the crisis came before the rock-pile was reached.

A little cry from the boy miner guided his eyes. He saw the figure of the hermit, who seemed to be intently watching their progress. Then came the rifle-shot. They saw Crazy Billy stagger and fall. They heard the exultant yell of the murderer, and saw him spring up from his covert.

Zimri Coon leveled his revolver, and fired. Though full one hundred yards away, Sleepy George flung aloft his arms and sprang into the air, with a horrible shriek of agony.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SLEEPY GEORGE REWARDED.

"WHOO-EE!" yelled Zimri Coon, as he sprang forward. "Threwed him cold that time—twur a long—Ge-thunder!"

The abrupt exclamation was extorted from the old hunter's lips by a couple of shots from the line of bushes just beyond that from which Sleepy George had arisen to receive his just reward. The bullets, forced through a rifled chamber, whistled unpleasantly near his ear, and Zimri lost little time in dodging behind a bowler that stood conveniently near, dragging Little Volcano after him.

"Pears like we've run chuck up into a hornets' nest! Keep your eyes peeled, lad—they's no tellin' what dodges them critters 'll be up to. Take it easy—"

"There were only two shots fired," muttered the boy miner, peering steadily around his corner; "and there go the fellows who fired them—look!"

Two men were retreating over the rocks and cross the valley, making wonderful progress considering the nature of the ground. They were indeed the two comrades of Sleepy George, lock-eyed Waddel and Ham-fat Zack.

Zimri, in accordance with the lessons taught him by a life of savage warfare, was taking considerable trouble to ascertain if the enemy had indeed all fled, when the hot-blooded impatience of Little Volcano cut the matter short. Darting swiftly forward he tore through the line of ashes, with revolver in readiness to drop his aim, if flushed. Grumblingly, yet not without feeling of admiration for the young fellow's recklessness, Zimri rejoined him.

"Look to your meat, old man," muttered the boy miner, as he pressed on to the spot where Crazy Billy lay in a pool of his own blood. With restless anxiety, he stooped over the prostrate figure, moving it so as to lay bare the art. Through the left breast the rifle-bullet had passed, lodging just beneath the skin on his back. Only a close observer could tell that the

hermit still lived. The pulse was faint and irregular, his heart barely fluttered beneath the boy miner's hand.

"I reckon he's a gone case," said Zimri, who had approached unheard. "When you git through, mebbe you'd like to take a squint at my meat. It's a old fri'nd o' ourn—Sleepy George won't steal no more chips!"

At that moment came an interruption strange and startling indeed. A sharp, clear voice hailed them. They glanced hurriedly up, and beheld the figure of a man standing with a cocked and loaded revolver in each hand.

"You might as well take it easily, boys," the man added. "I've got the drop on you. Before you could touch a weapon I could bore you through. I don't care about shooting, unless you force it upon me. But I've sworn to take you both—and I'll do it, dead or alive!"

"And you're the only man that can do it, Jack Hayes," coolly replied Little Volcano, never stirring. "Even you couldn't, if we weren't willing. Quick as you are, I could spring under cover of that rock before you could pull trigger—then where would you be?"

"If you try it on you'll see," laughed the sheriff.

"Don't dare me to then. Honestly, you are the man of all others whom I most wanted to see. You may not believe it, but I was on my way back to Hard Luck to stand my trial. To prove it I surrender to you—see!"

As he spoke Little Volcano turned his back upon the sheriff, and, unloosening his belt, cast his weapons into a clump of shrubbery some distance off. At his request, Zimri Coon followed his example, though reluctantly.

"There, captain," added the boy miner. "You see we don't mean to give you more trouble than we can help. You can come down and take possession whenever you like. Only—you must let us attend to this poor devil, first."

Not to be outdone in confidence, Hayes replaced his weapons, and descended from the rocks, limping and still suffering considerably from his bruises. He stood by in silence while the comrades carefully examined the wound of Crazy Billy. Zimri removed the bullet, and bandaged the wound as well as he was able under the circumstances.

"If he recovers 'twill be a miracle, said the sheriff. "I saw it all from the hill yonder, but too late to interfere. Then I recognized you, too, and—you know the rest."

"You see me drap one o' your pet witnesses, then," grinned Zimri. "Threwed him cold—er'n—"

"He kicks lively for a dead man," laughed Hayes, as Sleepy George suddenly attempted to rise, falling back with a hollow groan. "But it may be all the better for you that he was not killed outright. I know that he lied some at the trial—maybe we can find out the truth of the matter, now. There's no harm in trying, anyhow."

The hummer closed his eyes with a bitter groan as he recognized the three faces bending over him—probably the three whom he hated and feared more than the whole world besides. They examined his wound. The bullet had entered his left side, between two of the lower ribs. Hardly any blood stained his clothes. The bullet had left scarcely more trace than would the sting of a wasp.

"He is bleeding inside," whispered Hayes, cautiously. "Whatever we get out of him must be soon. You keep still, and let me manage it in my own way."

The acute spasm of pain passed away, and Sleepy George opened his eyes as Jack Hayes addressed him, sternly:

"You've reached the end of your rope at last, my man. As clear a case of malicious murder as ever I met with—and three good witnesses to prove it, too!"

"He made me—he swore he'd murder me ef I didn't do it," groaned the hummer, his eyes quailing.

"Now see here, George, there's been a good deal of underhand work going on lately, and I believe you can clear it all up, if you choose. I've got the whip-hand of you now, but I don't want to be too hard on you, unless you force it upon me. Tell you what I'll do. If you will tell me all you know—make a clean confession and sign it, I promise you that you shall not hang for this bit of work. I don't say you will escape all punishment, but I do say that I will not lay one finger upon you, nor attempt to bring you to justice in any way. If you refuse, by the heavens above! I will string you up to the nearest tree with my own hands, before the words are cold upon your lips! Now take your choice."

"You ain't playin' no bugs onto me?" asked the wounded assassin, doubtfully. "You mean it?"

"You have my word," was the quiet reply. "I'll do it! He's treated me like a dog, anyway—I don't owe him nothin' but kicks an' cusses! I'll tell the hull story. You take it down, ef you kin, an' let them fellers witness it—that'll cut him wuss'n all!" chuckled the wretch, thinking only of his revenge upon his proud, insolent master, little dreaming how ra-

pidly his own life was ebbing, in the absence of pain.

Sheriff Hayes produced a notebook and pencil, putting down the substance of the dying man's confession as it dropped from his lips. Sleepy George did make a clean breast of it. Not only the story of their treachery and plotting against Little Volcano, but enough else besides to condemn Long Tom to the gallows ten times over. Little Volcano listened breathlessly for a time, but then turned away, sickened and filled with disgust. Life seemed very hollow, then, and not worth the living.

The confession lasted full an hour, and might have run on still longer, but Hayes cut it short as he saw that the hummer was rapidly sinking, though still ignorant of how near he was to death's door. He was lifted up and managed to sign his name, in faint, trembling characters. Hayes and Zimri witnessed the signature, but when they looked around for Little Volcano, he was bending over Crazy Billy, his face pale as death, his eyes wildly dilated as he listened to the incoherent mutterings of the hermit.

"I knew it—I told you he was one of them!" said Little Volcano, in a strained voice. "Listen! he is talking of it now! If he could only tell all! He must—he shall not die until I learn the truth—learn who was his comrade. Zimri, you must go for help—there are doctors at Hard Luck. Ride for your life—bring one here if you have to tie him hand and foot!"

"You fergit, lad—" hesitated Coon, with a glance at Hayes.

"That is all past, friend—or will be when you say you bear me no ill-will for doing what I thought was my duty," quickly uttered the sheriff.

"That settles it, then!" cried Coon, exultantly. "I al'ays said you was a brick, Jack Hayes—shake!"

"You are losing time—and there's none to spare," impatiently cried the boy miner. "What if he should die before you get back—die, and take his secret with him. Go—ride as though the devil and all his imps were at your back! Tell the doctor just what the case is—tell him to bring plenty of stimulants—and make haste, for God's sake!"

"I'll go with you, friend," said Hayes. "It might be unhealthy for you to show yourself in town alone, while they believe all this against you. Come on—"

They saw Sleepy George suddenly rise to a sitting position, his face horribly distorted. He seemed as though trying to speak. One hand clutched fiercely at his throat. Then a yell, so loud, so full of utter despair and horror, parted his lips, only to die away in a choking, gurgling sound, as a stream of clotted blood poured from his mouth. Then his head slowly drooped, he fell over upon his side. A convulsive quiver, then all was over.

"He is dead!" muttered Hayes, not entirely unmoved, despite his long life amid just such scenes.

"You won't git mad an' do him any hurt, will ye, lad?" whispered Zimri, addressing Little Volcano, but an impatient gesture was his only reply.

The two men slowly proceeded down the hillside, Hayes leaning upon Zimri's sturdy arm. Little Volcano sat beside the unconscious hermit, listening to his low-muttered ravings. To most hearers, the words would have seemed empty vagaries, but to the boy miner they were full of a terrible interest. Allusions to a startling crime—of murder and foul treachery—of an innocent man suffering for the crimes of others. At times these ravings grew more connected, and the boy miner hung over the lips of the hermit as though his very life depended upon his hearing every word. At times he moistened Crazy Billy's lips with water from his canteen, yet all the same there was a stern, undying lust for vengeance tearing at his heartstrings, and more than once he had to turn abruptly aside and stop his ears tightly, lest he should spring upon and tear the raving man limb from limb.

One of these absences was longer than the others, and he returned from the struggle with himself, pale and haggard. The wounded man was lying still and motionless. With a sickening fear at his heart, the boy miner sprang forward and knelt beside the hermit's side.

But Crazy Billy was not dead. His eyes slowly opened, and rested upon the boy miner's face. A puzzled look filled them, but this gradually faded away, while a faint smile played around his lips. Breathless, awe-stricken, Little Volcano bent over to catch the faintly-whispered words:

"Harry—brother—thank God! you have come at last!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER BLOW.

"WAAL—I ber-durned!" There was a peculiar eloquence in this brief and pointed speech, as it dropped in measured accents from the lips of Zimri Coon. A printed column couldn't have said more.

As heretofore stated, Zimri and Sheriff Hayes left the hermit's cave in company, their object

being, first to regain the two horses brought from Joaquin's camp, and by their aid to reach Hard Luck before the two fugitive comrades of Sleepy George could give the alarm to their master. Their disappointment may be imagined when they found the animals were missing; as Zimri quaintly observed "common cussin' couldn't do the subject's justice."

"You see the sign," he added, with a snort of disgust. "Them ain't our huff-prints. While we was palaverin' over yender, them two pizen imps o' thunder an' guns smelt out our critters—"

"The game's up, then, unless we can cut them off through the hills. And I'm in a sweet condition for that work!" grumbled Hayes, rubbing his lame leg.

"What's did cain't sca'cely be helped," philosophically replied Zimri. "Even ef Long Tom slips us now, his time 'll come—sure! But now—it's jest es you say. I'll try to head 'em off, ef you say so—mebbe I kin git thar ahead of 'em. You kin go back an' wait fer me, ef you like, or foller the best you kin."

"We'll go together. You couldn't show your nose in Hard Luck without being made cold meat of by the first man you met, and it's partly my fault that this is the case. I don't mean to leave you until I've set that all square. Come on—I'll show you what a cripple can do when he tries."

Zimri's tolerable knowledge of the country stood them in good stead, and by choosing the shortest and easiest cuts, they made really rapid progress, delayed though they were by the sheriff's injuries. They pressed on all night, halting for an hour in the morning to roast a rabbit which Zimri knocked over with his revolver, then on again, nearing the town of Hard Luck not long after noon.

"Something's turned up!" muttered Hayes, as he noted an unusual bustle around the Miner's Rest, principally of women and "John's," with a sprinkling of rough-clad diggers and an Indian or two, to make the medley complete.

The sheriff and his companion were quickly recognized, and the crowd gathered around them; but ere a question could be asked or answered, Mrs. Champion, half-frantic, elbowed her way through and set up a wail, whereupon a dozen or more sympathizing spectators endeavored to reveal the trouble her sobs and tears rendered obscure.

Hayes bore it all as best he could for a few minutes, but then sternly commanded silence. Picking out one of the number, he bade him speak quickly and to the point.

"The young leddy—Miss Mary, you know, boss—she's gone—nobody don't know whar nur how, no more'n nothin'," came the reply.

"Some evil villain has dragged her away—I know the poor dear will come home all dead and—and murdered!" sobbed Mrs. Champion, hysterically.

"There—I don't believe it is as bad as that. Calm yourself, madam—we will do the best we can, and will restore your niece in a few hours."

Then he bade two of the women look after the hostess of the Miner's Rest, and as she was led away, he called the dozen miners around him, telling them in a few short sentences what had been discovered since his departure.

"Hold!" he cried, sternly, as a wild yell of angry vengeance greeted the intelligence. "Remember that we are white men. No violence until I give the word. We will arrest Long Tom, but he shall have a fair trial—that is unless he has took to his heels already."

"He was runnin' a game, as usual, last night."

"Enough! Scatter and surround this hole."

This was effected without difficulty, then Hayes entered, with Zimri Coon, first giving orders to arrest any and all parties attempting to leave the building. They only found two men within, playing poker. Hayes recognized them for two of Long Tom's dealers.

"Where's the old man, Curley?" asked the sheriff.

"I'd give a few to know that myself," was the surly reply.

"Now, Curley, I'm on business. There's been a power of dirty work hatched up in this shebang, and I'm going to put the whole outfit through the cradle. I don't say you've had any finger in the pie, but the plainer and straighter you hoe your row, the better it will be for you. I want Long Tom. Suppose you tell me all you know about him."

"He was here last night, as usual, but the game was slim, and he said we'd better shut up. He went to his room, in there, but come out ag'in soon. We bunked down here. That was the last we saw of him. I know he went over to Michigan Ann's—they say she cut up mighty rough about something. I went up to her, thinkin' somethin' was wrong, but she was blind drunk. Ef it's business you want him for, I reckon he got wind of it and 'cluded to levant. Somebody called him out in a hurry last night—"

"One was Cock-eyed Waddel," put in the other gambler. "I hearn his voice, an' knowed it in a minnit."

"Durn the corn-twisted crooked luck!" growl-

ed Zimri. "Though I mought 'a' knowed it. It's jest a piece with the hull tormented doin's!"

"Let's have a look at this room you were speaking about. There may be something in there worth seeing."

The gamblers hesitated, evidently fearing the result if Long Tom should return and learn that they had betrayed his trust. But a sharp word from Hayes solved their doubts. He was more to be feared, present, than their employer absent.

The room remained much as when the reader saw it last, save that the iron chest now yielded readily to the sheriff's touch. It was empty.

The gamblers exchanged black looks. Though they had suspected as much, this proof that Long Tom had fled, came none the less heavily upon them.

"Now, boys," said Hayes, as they returned to the outer room, "I guess the best thing you can do is to lay around here until this matter is settled. You may not be needed, but if you are, I should hate to have to send after you. Come on, old man; let's travel."

The two gamblers looked as though they would like to ask a few more questions, but the cold, hard look they had learned to know so well, settled over the sheriff's face, and they felt that it might be dangerous. So, with more than one curse upon Long Tom's head, they returned to their interrupted game of "draw."

"It's plain as the nose on your face, old man," quoth Jack Hayes, as he hobbled down the crooked street, paying little attention to the diggers who hesitatingly followed him, at a respectful distance; "when we find the girl, Long Tom won't be far away. Whether willingly or not, she left this burgh in his company—that I am free to swear. If we can only strike his trail—and that makes me think! Didn't I see old Superfine back yonder? Go tell him that there's whisky to be earned. Bring him with you to Michigan Ann's shebang; lively, now!"

Zimri understood the sheriff's meaning, and promptly made his way back to the Dew-Drop Inn, where the shrewdness of his guess was made apparent by the presence of a half-drunk Indian, no less than "Superfine," big chief of the Pi-utes. A tall, fine-looking warrior, when sober, simply dressed. A ragged blanket hanging from one shoulder; an old flour sack wrapped around his loins in such a manner that the big blue letters SUPERFINE could only be seen when the chief was faced from the admiring spectator. A true Indian in his love for strong drink, Superfine willingly followed Zimri, when he learned what was required.

Meanwhile Hayes was busy. He experienced some little difficulty in gaining admission into the "high-toned" *maison du joie* presided over by Mistress Michigan Ann, but once recognized in his official capacity, his work was unexpectedly easy. He found the woman in a maudlin condition—full of bad whisky, disappointed love and jealousy, and quietly proceeded to pump her dry—figuratively speaking. It was not hard to do.

All Hard Luck knew what tie connected Long Tom and Michigan Ann. He had visited her the night before. There had been a furious quarrel. Long Tom ended it by giving her a sound thrashing—as her bruised and discolored face bore plain evidence. Then he swore that all was over between them, adding with devilish cruelty that he had found another woman worth ten thousand of her.

But Hayes could learn nothing more from her, if indeed she knew it. That Long Tom had fled the town, he knew before; a clew as to the direction taken, the probable point for which he was heading, was what he wished to learn. But that Michigan Ann could not, or would not tell him.

Disappointed in a measure, he went downstairs, and calling the household together, questioned them sharply. But there is a peculiar notion of honor among the class he was dealing with, and despite his threats, he could learn nothing.

Rejoining Zimri and Superfine, he re-entered the town, but before he had explained to the chief his wishes, a lean, hang-dog looking fellow accosted him.

"You axed some questions over to the house, yender, boss. You know how 'tis; them gals 'd scratch the eyes out o' a feller ef he was to squeal on anybody they knowed—"

"Spit it right out, Pimple—what dirty work are you up to now?" sharply demanded Hayes.

"Give me fifty dollars, an' I'll show you Long Tom!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TERRIBLE PERIL.

THE keenest-eyed observer could not have detected anything unusual in the appearance of Long Tom as he entered the Dew-Drop Inn, not far from midnight. And yet his ears still tingled with the hasty speech that told him his carefully-cherished plans were all ruined, that naught but instant flight could save him from a disgraceful death. He had been called out by Cock-eyed Waddel and Ham-fat Zack, who told him how they had waylaid Crazy Billy, and of what followed. How they had fled—"from nigh onto forty men, onder Jack Hayes," as

Ham-fat seriously affirmed—and succeeded in stealing two horses, nearly killing them in their haste to warn their employer of his danger. Long Tom swallowed this—with a grain of salt, yet swallowed it—and gave the rascals the few hundreds which he had about his person, then hastened to wind up his affairs as thoroughly as the time would admit.

The fugitives had not lied—merely exaggerated a little. As they realized that nobody was chasing them, they paused for breath upon the ridge, glancing back toward their recent ambush. They saw three men gathered around Sleepy George, and recognized one as being Sheriff Hayes. They could tell, too, that the bummer was still alive; this, in such hands, they knew was equivalent to a full confession. Turning to resume their flight, Waddel discovered the two horses in the valley beneath them, and finding no one was guarding them, he declared his intention of confiscating them. This was adroitly done, unsuspected by the owners, and the thieves rode hotfoot to where Sleepy George had cached the stolen gold. Securing this, they warned Long Tom of the coming storm, and fled before it themselves; but not far. Two days later there was a hanging-bee in Fiddletown. Joaquin's doubt concerning his horses had, happily, come to pass; Cock-eyed Waddel and Ham-fat Zack died as horse-thieves.

Long Tom glanced quickly around the bar-room. He saw "The Preacher" sitting at a table, half drunk, though capable of prompt obedience as quick as he caught his master's eye.

"Come," muttered the gambler, as they entered the darkness. "You must brace up, old man, for there's work ahead of us. I'll tell you all when we get to a suitable place; and while we are walking, you just make up your mind to do as I think best, without asking any questions. You've been soaking your brains so long that you're fit for nothing else. Mind—I say you must carry out the part I give you, or the odds are that we will both grace the end of a trail-ropo before another sunset."

They reached the house presided over by Michigan Ann, and ordering some liquor sent up to his room, Long Tom briefly related what he had been told.

"Now you see how we stand, Paul," he began, only to be interrupted by the other, whom the startling tidings had partially sobered.

"How you stand—I had nothing to do with it—"

"You were along when the boys tried to rub those two devils out; that would be enough to hang you. But even if not—we have rowed in the same boat too long for you to think of setting up for yourself. Don't drive me to do what I have already threatened; that old affair can be easily revived."

"You killed him—I only—" faltered the Preacher.

"Hush! you cursed fool!" hissed the gambler, his eyes glowing. "These walls are like paper. But you know I can do all I say—no matter what the real facts are. We must leave this hole, before day. You must go with me—and one other. You can guess who I mean?"

"Not—not her?" faltered the drunkard, half pleadingly.

"Yes—her. You need make no bones about it. You must induce her to go with you, secretly. Tell her what you will—that a detective has struck your trail—anything you please; only mark this. If you fail me, I will go and tell her everything—mind, everything, and show her the proofs, too; that instead of an unfortunate defaulter, her father assassinated one man, then deliberately swore away the life of an innocent man—sent him to the gallows for the deed you committed!"

"If—I can coax her, you will promise to—to do the square thing by us?" asked the drunken wretch, cowed by the fierce audacity of the greater and stronger criminal.

"I told you before that I loved her better than my life. I asked her to marry me, but she refused. I didn't much care for that, for I counted on you to talk her over. This will be a good chance. You get her to promise to become my wife, and I will give you every proof I hold concerning that old affair. If you fail—well, I promise you that I will hang you for that job, though I twist a rope for my own neck at the same time!"

There was little more conversation, all bearing upon the same point. The result was just as might have been expected between two such men. The preacher—Paul Morton—yielded—as he had done too often—and set off at once to meet his daughter, Mary.

Scarcely had he left, when Long Tom found himself face to face with an entirely different sort of antagonist. Suspecting something of the truth, Michigan Ann had listened, from an adjoining room, and overheard all. The interview would not be a pleasant one to record, and the reader is already acquainted with the result.

Long Tom hastily left the house, and uttering a peculiar sound, had the satisfaction of seeing "Pimple" appear with three horses. Slipping a few ounces into the man's hand, Long Tom dismissed him. But Pimple was not so easily satisfied, and dogged the gambler as

he made a circuit around the town, hitching the animals near the foot of the "Devil's Chute." Growing impatient, after a few minutes' waiting, Long Tom started toward the town, but met Paul Morton and his daughter hastening toward him. Heaven only knows what lies the wretched drunkard had poured into her ears. She was sobbing painfully, though bravely endeavoring to choke them back, and seemed only anxious to leave the town as quickly as possible. She paid little attention to the gambler. Morton managed to whisper in his ear that she knew him only as "a friend," and that he had better keep shady until they were clear of the town, at least. They rode up the Chute, still followed by Pimple, who scented money in the air, nor did he leave the trail for one moment, measuring his speed by theirs, until he saw them turn into a small cave, just as the day was dawning, leaving their horses in a little valley just below, where they would be effectually screened from view of any passer-by.

Pimple squatted down under cover and scratched his head. He believed that there was money to be made out of this affair—but how? Why had Long Tom left Hard Luck so secretly? An elopement? That looked like it. Did Michigan Ann know anything about the matter?

"I'll run the risk," he muttered, stealing down the valley. "If it's news to her, she'll pay big for the office."

Pimple quietly collected the animals, led them beyond sound of the cave, then mounting one, he drove the others before him along the narrow trail for several miles, then left them, doing the same with the one he was riding when a couple of miles from town.

Not until they had entered the cave and kindled a fire did Mary Morton recognize Long Tom in the companion of their flight. Her surprise and discomfort cannot be easily measured, and she kept close to her father's side, with a distrust she made no attempt to conceal from the gambler.

His ugly temper deeply ruffled by recent events, Long Tom was quick to note this fear, and it soon awoke the devil in his breast. For a time he did struggle against the temptation, for he really loved—with a fierce, ungoverned passion—Mary, and felt that he could endure almost anything for the sake of hearing her call him her husband. Had it been considered advisable to travel through the day, the terrible scenes which followed might possibly have been averted. But, knowing that Hayes would spare no pains to hunt him down, Long Tom did not care to risk the chances of meeting any one who might afterward point out their trail. For this reason he resolved to travel only by night, at least until at a safe distance from Hard Luck.

Unfortunately for himself, Paul Morton had not forgotten to furnish himself with a goodly-sized flask of whisky, and rendered uncomfortable by the evident anger of Long Tom, he consoled himself by frequent swallows of the liquor, skillfully eluding the eyes of his child, until he sunk into a drunken slumber. As though watching for this moment, Long Tom drew nearer the maiden.

"This is an unpleasant business, Miss Morton," he began. "But two more nights will carry us beyond all danger, I hope; then you will have an easier time of it. We will spare no—"

"Oh, sir!" cried Mary, imploringly. "Father has told me all—that only for your aid he would have been—been arrested. Believe me, I am grateful, but—please leave us to go our way alone. We will remember you—"

"I expect you will—I don't believe there is much danger of your forgetting me very soon," said the gambler, with a disagreeable laugh. "Now—see! Since you have opened the subject, suppose we go through with it. You say you are truly grateful for my services; yet you are anxious to get rid of me! Let me tell you what I have done. I have left my business—as good as twenty thousand dollars a year. I have put myself under suspicion of being a partner in your father's—we'll say *misfortune*. Were I to return to Hard Luck, the odds are I would be arrested at once. I don't tell you this to draw forth your thanks; only to show you that when I once put my hand to a game I play the limits. I've said I would see your father through with this scrape, and I mean to do it. Of course I have my reasons. Men don't work in these days without at least a hope of pay. You are smart enough to know better, even were I to swear that I am doing all this through pure friendship for your father. I like him well enough, but I like *you* a thousand times—"

"I will not listen to such words," cried Mary, her eyes flashing with anger. "If you repeat them, I will awake father—"

"You couldn't do that," laughed the gambler; "and even if you did, he would say I had earned the right to be listened to. You see," he added, as Morton only gave a low grunt, as Mary called to him and shook his shoulder. "I did not lie to you. He is dead-drunk. Do you think he is a fit guardian for you? No! you are worthy a better one—a man who can love you as you deserve to be loved; a man who can keep

you in ease and comfort, who has the heart to love, the brain to provide for, and the arm to protect you. I can do all this—I *will* do it. I ask you now to be my wife. Wait—don't answer too hastily. Consider your situation—consider what may be the consequences to yourself and to *him*, before you speak."

"There can be but one answer—and that answer I have already given you," firmly replied the maiden. "I do not love you—I never will. I have always disliked and feared you—now I loathe and despise you!"

"You have thrown away your last chance!" snarled Long Tom, as he grasped her arm tightly. "I warned you—I warned you!"

Mary shrieked aloud with terror. Morton was aroused from his drunken sleep by the cry. He saw the gambler dragging Mary away, and his long dormant manhood revived as if by magic.

"Stop!" he cried, springing forward. "Unhand her, Long Tom, or I'll— My God! he has murdered me!" he shrieked, staggering back and falling to the ground, the hot blood spurting from his breast.

Long Tom had plunged a bowie-knife deep into the drunkard's left breast as he attempted to rescue Mary.

"You would have it!" snarled the gambler, thrusting the bloody weapon into his bosom; then turning to Mary, who crouched in one corner, almost stupefied: "See what your cursed folly has wrought! Only for you he would be living now."

As he spoke he forcibly drew her toward him, pressing his hot lips to hers. Vainly the maiden struggled. She was naught but a child in his fierce grasp. A wolfish glow filled his eyes. She felt that she was doomed beyond all human aid. He pressed her madly to his breast. Her hand closed upon something hard. She clutched it and struck despairingly. There was a fierce yell, a loud report—then all was dark.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A DREAD CONFESSION.

"I DON'T reckon you need me any longer, boss," said a peculiar cracked voice. "Yender's the lay-out. The trail lays atween them two trees; runs straight ahead fer some twenty paces, then turns to the left. Look at that patch o' bushes, by the p'inted rock—that's right whar the hole is. You can't miss it—"

"Not with you for a guide, Pimple," quietly responded Sheriff Hayes. "I don't believe you would care to try any of your tricks on me, still—"

"You hain't paid me, yet—be sure I wouldn't run the risk o' slippin' up on *that*," grinned Pimple. "Your folks is in thar, 'less they've tuck to the hills afoot. I'll wait yere fer ye—but I'm free to say I don't keer to face Long Tom when his mad's up. He'd see the hull thing the minnit he flung glimmer onto me, an' he'd send fer me, shore!"

"'Twould be the best act he ever was guilty of," laughed Hayes, shortly. "There's no use talking, Pimple. 'Up you've got to go. And mind this: I'll 'send for' you, at the first sign of crawfishin'."

Pimple began to wish he had let this promising speculation alone. He had been paid by Long Tom for his services, and then had sold him to Sheriff Hayes, for a consideration.

While Hayes was procuring horses and giving his men their instructions, Zimri Coon sought out the only doctor left in Hard Luck and dispatched him, in charge of a trusty guide, to the hermit's cave. His conscience satisfied, he joined Hayes in his mad ride with redoubled zest. Pimple guided them well, and they reached the foot of the hill in which the fugitives had sought refuge just as the sun was setting.

All was silent as they cautiously clambered up the steep trail; but suddenly there came a wild scream—a pistol-shot.

"There's the devil's work going on there!" grated Hayes, pressing forward. "Lively, boys, lively!"

Pimple's foot slipped and he fell, rolling out of the way, among the rocks. He was not so badly hurt but that a satisfied grin distorted his countenance as he peered after the men as they scrambled up toward the cave.

A cry of horror broke from the sheriff's lips as he dashed aside the leafy screen and sprang into the cavern.

Three bodies lay upon the blood-stained floor; only one of them giving signs of life. Paul Morton, supporting himself upon his right hand that clasped the still smoking revolver with which he had stricken down the maddened gambler, his other hand vainly trying to stanch the hot life-blood that welled from a deep wound in his breast, gasped:

"Make sure of him—Long Tom—he murdered me and my—my daughter!"

"Stir up that fire, old man," cried Hayes. "Hawkins, draw that fellow's teeth there," he added, as the gambler strove to arise, on hearing strange voices.

Hayes, after a hasty investigation, assured himself that the maiden had not been injured beyond a slight cut upon the head, where she had fallen against a rock point. He gave her into charge of two men, who conveyed her out-

side where the cool evening air would soon restore her to consciousness.

"Run to earth at last, Long Tom!" cried Hayes, with a chuckle of intense satisfaction, when the extinguished fire blazed up and rendered objects as visible as the noonday sun.

"You've come too late for more than to see me die, anyhow!" snarled the gambler. "I can laugh at your rope, thanks to the girl and that drunken sneak yonder."

As he spoke he plucked a bowie-knife from his breast, where the blade had been buried almost to the hilt. A gush of blood followed; and the gambler laughed harshly as he caught some of it in his hand and flung it at Hayes.

"Don't crow too soon, my man," coolly replied the sheriff. "We are used to quick work. Coon, just hold his hands while I plug up this hole."

The wound was bandaged, and the gambler's hands bound, lest he should attempt to tear off the cloths. Another wound was found upon his head, where Morton's bullet had glanced from his skull, but it was only trifling.

Meanwhile Morton was not neglected, though it was plain that he was fast sinking—that he could not live many hours. When given to understand this, he asked for liquor, to strengthen him until his story was told.

"I don't care much what becomes of me—only I wish to show *him* up," he said, as the stimulant strengthened him. "And Mary—my daughter. She at least is innocent, gentlemen. You will not make her suffer for her father's sins?"

"We call ourselves white men, stranger," sharply said Hayes. "We're rough and reckless enough, but we're not so low down as all that comes to. Rest easy about the lady. Go on with your story—but make it short, for Long Tom seems bound to cheat the rope."

Enough of the tragic story so painfully told by the dying man has already been shadowed forth in the course of this story, to render it unnecessary for us to follow his words in detail. A brief synopsis will be enough.

Paul Morton, Thomas Langford and Charles Fletcher were all employed in the same bank. They were "fast young men," close friends, and entered the same downward path together. Langford proved the evil genius of the trio. Fletcher's was a most confiding and trusting nature. Morton was weak and easily influenced. There were many things which Morton could not entirely clear up, but on the main points of the tragedy he was positive. Langford murdered the young planter with Fletcher's knife, and robbed him. Fletcher was arrested for the crime, tried and condemned. Morton and Langford swore his life away; the former forced to do so by Langford, who had discovered him in a forgery to make good the money he had stolen from the bank. Fletcher was hung. Morton found himself in the power of a hard task-master. From that day on, the bank was regularly robbed, and the books "doctored"—not a very difficult task, since the confederates were now cashier and assistant cashier. At last discovery threatened, and Morton joined Langford in robbing the bank of a large sum, then fled, eluding pursuit, finally turning up in California. One day Langford showed him a letter from a friend East, who wrote that Mrs. Morton and her child had both died. Then he gave up all hope and took to drinking more than ever. But the letter was only half-right. His daughter still lived. She joined her aunt, Mrs. Lector Champion, who was bound for California, in the vague hope of finding her father.

Providence guided the travelers to the town of Hard Luck, and Morton's amazement can be imagined when he recognized the sister of his dead wife. That night he learned that the young girl was his daughter. For some days he resisted the temptation, but finally made himself known to Mary, though he begged her to keep his secret. They met frequently, generally at night. (At this point Zimri Coon listened with breathless attention.) She told him how Little Volcano—the only name she as yet knew him by—had saved her life, and how they had learned to love each other. In return he warned her of the plots being laid against the boy miner's life. He joined the party led by Sleepy George, only to serve Little Volcano as far as lay in his power.

In conclusion he narrated what had occurred since their flight from Hard Luck.

In addition to what we have given, Morton revealed other crimes of which Long Tom had been guilty, enough to condemn him a thousand times. But, as these crimes bear no relation to this story, I have passed over them.

Through it all the gambler maintained a sullen silence. He saw that death was inevitable, and with dogged courage he resolved to "die game."

Morton fell back exhausted, as he concluded his confession. A flask of whisky was held to his lips, and he soon gained strength enough to beg that his daughter might be sent to him.

"You shall see her—but it's only right to tell you that you are going fast, stranger. You can't live the night out—maybe not another hour." Then turning away, he added: "Take

up that bundle of sin, boys, and tote him outside. He's not fit to breathe the same air with a lady. Besides, I guess we might as well hold a pow-wow over him at once; it would be a waste of trouble to lug him clear to town—and he's so infernal, pizen mean, he'd die on the road just to cheat the halter!"

Long Tom was removed, and Mary, by this time fully restored, took her place beside her dying father.

Sheriff Hayes cut little time to waste. He spoke briefly to his men. They had heard the deathbed confession, which he, for one, believed was plain truth. They knew what crimes the prisoner stood charged with. They were to consult together, and decide upon the fate of the gambler.

Five minutes later Zimri Coon spoke up, acting as foreman of the jury.

"Jedge, we've talked it over. One on us is in favor of roasting the prisoner alive; one feller sais spread-eagle him atween two saplin's; the rest on us vote to hang the cuss—an' is only sorry he hain't got as many lives as a cat, so we could hang him a dozen times over!"

"You hear, prisoner; have you anything to say?"

Long Tom replied by a storm of curses and blasphemy. At a motion from Hayes, a trail-ropo was noosed around his neck, and in the absence of large enough trees, one man mounted his horse and trotted down the rocky trail, dragging behind him all that remained of Long Tom.

An hour later a cry from Mary aroused them. Paul Morton was dead. Sheriff Hayes sought to console the maiden, but he found it harder work than fighting Indians. Finally, her grief, added to the fatigue and trials she had undergone, threw Mary into a sort of stupor. A rude litter was made, and two men set out with her toward Hard Luck. The others remained behind, to wall up the mouth of the cave, within which lay the body of Paul Morton. It was his only grave.

Overtaking the litter, the party proceeded together until they reached Hard Luck, where Mary was tenderly cared for by her aunt.

"No," said Zimri Coon, as Hayes urged him to "bunk" with him, and take the repose they needed so badly. "Thar's the boy lookin' fer me, and I've got ge-lorious news fer him! I'm clean crazy jest to hear him open his eyes and sneal—whoo-ee!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CLOUDS CLEAR AWAY.

LITTLE VOLCANO sat with his eyes fixed upon the haggard face of Crazy Billy—now Crazy Billy no longer.

A wild, weird story had the boy miner listened to, told by broken, disconnected snatches through the long night—a story that seemed incredible, even with the living evidence lying before him.

The wounded man told, in feeble, dreamy tones, the black story of his life. Of how he had been led into temptation by those whom he trusted even above himself; of how he fell, of stealing money from his employers and gambling with it in hopes of making good his losses. And then came the story of that fatal night. The heavy gambling, his loss, the quarrel and drunken threats; his stumbling over the murdered planter, only to be arrested for the crime. He dwelt long upon the trial—when his life was sworn away by the two men whom, until then, he had considered his truest, purest friends. And then that black day when he was hung!

He would dwell upon every little particular, every trifling event of the day. But he earnestly declared that he was hung, pronounced dead, cut down and turned over to his mother's agents, who had him buried in due course.

The next he could remember was of undergoing the most excruciating tortures. Under their influence, he sprang erect. He heard wild yells and cries of terror around him, then sounds of flight. He glared around—he found himself in a dissecting-room. The shock was too great. As he turned to flee, he sunk down, senseless.

Of what passed next, he had but faint recollection. It seemed as though he heard voices, as though he was being carried through the air—then all was blank.

He found himself in an insane asylum. He bent his every energy to one point—escape. It seemed as though a lifetime must have been spent within those walls. But the day came at length, and he was a free man once more.

Thus far the wounded man narrated his story with tolerable clearness, and the boy miner had little difficulty in following him. But now the fever seemed to increase, and the hermit raved brokenly, still harping upon the old subject, but Little Volcano listened in vain. He could make nothing of the disconnected sentences.

In this manner the night and day passed. Near midnight, the doctor dispatched by Zimri Coon made his appearance. He could not give Little Volcano much hope of a successful issue. The wound was a terrible one. Yet he would do his best.

Thus Zimri Coon found them, near sunset.

Crazy Billy was sleeping peacefully, the doctor said in a fair way for recovery. You can imagine how eagerly Little Volcano listened to the "ge-lorious news" of old Zimri; of the death of the two men whom he had hunted for so long, and—even more welcome tidings—that Mary Morton had not played him false.

Dear reader, is there any need of dwelling at length upon scenes which you can imagine so much more completely? To picture the meeting between Mary and Harry, the explanations and sweet renewals of their love-vows; of how Charles Fletcher finally recovered his health, though his reason ever remained clouded; of the wonderful richness of the placer given them by Joaquin Murieta—let a line suffice.

In the year of our lord 1856, there was a grand wedding at the Miner's Rest, in the town of Hard Luck. Zimri Coon and Jack Hayes were there; morning found them tight-locked in each other's arms, lying beneath a table, snoring in drunken concert; nor were they alone.

As for Mary and Harry—ah! they were too happy for an idle pen like this to picture.

Sheriff Hayes never made good his oath of killing Joaquin Murieta. Another, no less skillful and more fortunate, rid the Golden Land of its terrible scourge. In July, 1853, Captain Henry Love, at the head of twenty men—tried and true comrades of his in the Texan and Mexican wars—overtook Joaquin, and annihilated his band, killing both Joaquin and Three-Fingered Jack.

Murieta's head and Manuel Garcia's hand were taken to San Francisco and placed upon exhibition at John King's, corner of Halleck and Sansome Sts., opposite the American Theater—"admission one dollar!"

THE END.

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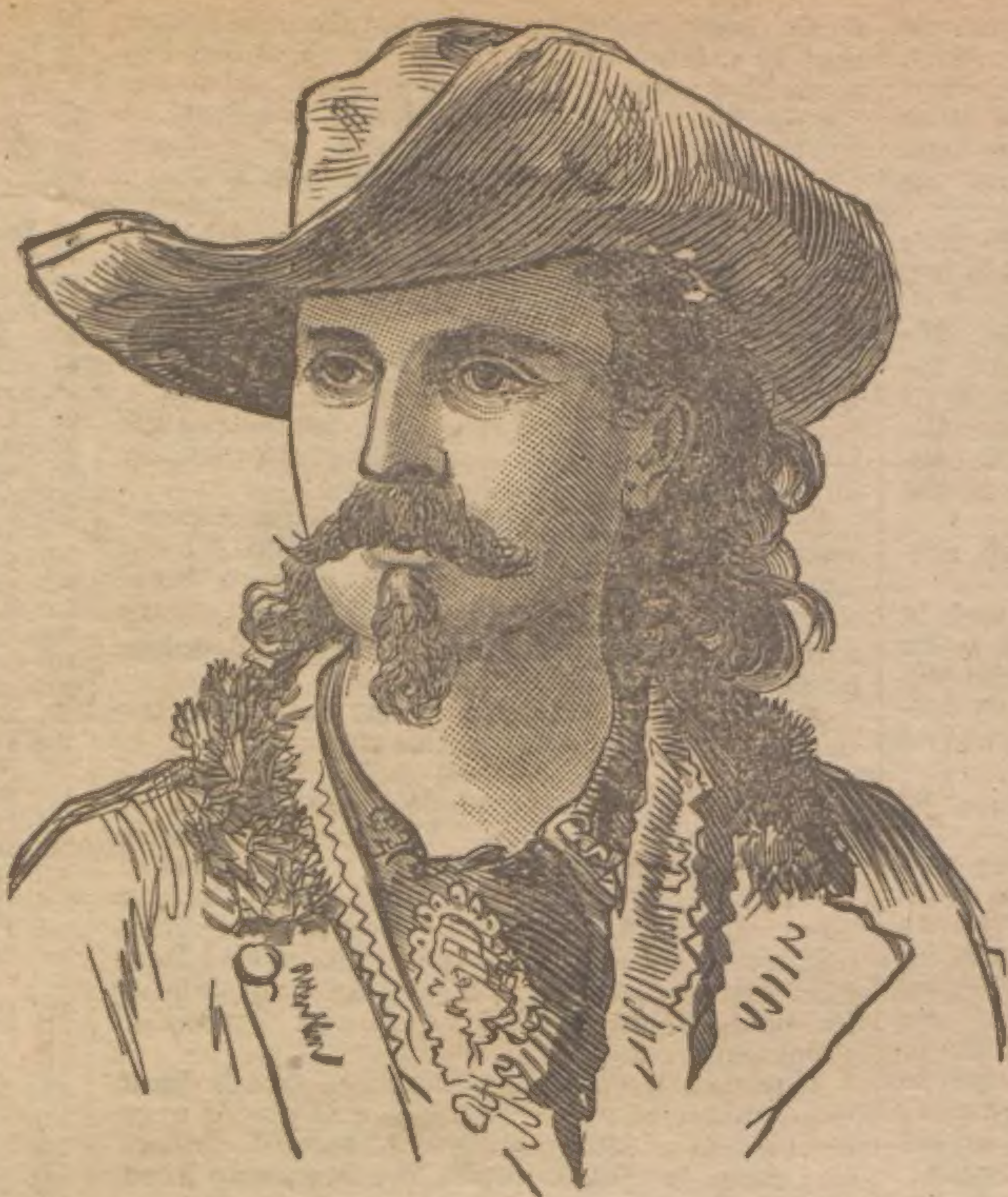
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